The thrilling new TV series starring
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Star

MURDER, SHE WROTE 4

MURDER IN TWO ACTS

A NOVEL BY DAVID DEUTSCH

Fielding cleared his throat. His tone became sombre.

'I'm afraid, Mrs Fletcher, I am the bearer of distressing news. Miss Macgill was involved in a fatal car accident two days ago . . . her car went off a bridge. There were no witnesses so we really can't say precisely how it happened.'

Jessica couldn't find her voice. Her usually twinkling eyes welled up with tears.

'Emma specifically requested that you attend the services, let me know your flight number and I'll pick you up at the airport.'

Fielding hung up the phone. That was much easier than even he'd expected. Now he only hoped Jessica would fit into the rest of the plans just as easily . . .

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MURDER, SHE WROTE 4: MURDER IN TWO ACTS

a novel by David Deutsch
based on the Universal television series
'Murder, She Wrote'
created by Peter S. Fischer and Richard Levinson
& William Link

Adapted from the episodes 'Sing A Song of Murder',
written by Peter S. Fischer
and
'Death in the Afternoon',
teleplay by Paul Savage, story by Paul W. Cooper

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CHAPTER ONE

From the Clock Tower of Big Ben came the striking of the hour – 10 o'clock – the deep chime muffled somewhat as it was borne through the evening mists, beyond the 19th Century Palace of Westminster and across the River Thames. Despite a full moon and the tower's brightly illuminated four clock faces, anyone chancing by Westminster this late summer evening would have found it exceedingly difficult to read the time; for London was experiencing a phenomenon rare since the 1950s – an actual London fog.

A very short distance downriver from the Houses of Parliament, under the two towers of the famed Westminster Bridge, barges carried coal from the North of England, and tankers glided past with their cargo of North Sea oil. Their foghorns sounded warnings through the night. The Thames was dark and ominous. Where it flowed past the white stones of the foreboding Tower of London, the river grew quieter – save for the lapping of the waters against the quays – and the mists grew still thicker. One could easily imagine them taking shape into the ghosts of those unfortunates who met their end on the Tower's infamous scaffold. It is said that in Elizabethan days, the severed heads of executed convicts bobbed in these waters, and that England's greatest writer, William Shakespeare, used them as props in his tragedies at the Old Globe.

In marked contrast to the lonely eeriness along the river which harboured ghosts of the past, the West End was teeming with modern night life. On the sidewalks, men and

women dressed unseasonably in tweed – many of them sporting umbrellas in light of the damp weather – braved the cool night air as they bustled to cinemas. Outside the Odeon in Leicester Square, crowds queued up for a film that was currently all the rage. A juggler on the sidewalk kept them entertained. A pair of punk-rockers danced by to the sounds of music blaring from their cassette players. Elsewhere in the vicinity of Piccadilly Circus, lights spelled out the names of the legitimate theatres, most of them bordering Shaftesbury Avenue or the narrower St Martin's Lane – theatres such as the Lyric, Apollo, Queen's, Albery, Drury Lane.

The Haymarket, where the Royal Shakespeare Company was currently performing *The Merchant of Venice*, attracted a more sophisticated crowd than the more popular theatres nearer Piccadilly. Even further removed from the blaring car horns and neon of Regent Street and Piccadilly was Covent Garden. Once an area of tawdry fruit stalls, the old market at Covent Garden had been transformed into a fashionable shopping complex. The Royal Opera was performing Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* in the Royal Opera House of Covent Garden, the audience already having adjourned outside into the narrow lane for the first intermission.

Beyond Covent Garden, beyond Drury Lane, and even beyond Kingsway, stood the Mayhew Music Hall, more a monument to a bygone era than a vital establishment. Built as an elegant vaudeville house in the 1860's – the heyday of the English music halls – the Mayhew was succumbing to the public's changing fancy. It had survived. But just barely. The last of a dying breed, the Mayhew had endured while its sister music hall, Shepherd's Bush Empire, had become the television studios of the BBC. Unlike the Metropolitan Music Hall, demolished in 1963, the Mayhew had been spared the wrecking ball which obliterated that theatre to make way for the flyover at Harrow Road. Sentimentality, panache, stylized vulgarity – the essence of the

English music hall's character – were long out of vogue, passed away with the Empire. Today, when a few quid could buy an evening of entertainment at the cinema or rent a videocassette, there was not much point in paying to see a dying breed of performers working behind the footlights to rouse an audience more accustomed to Dolby stereo and home video on the telly.

Few people who strolled by Mayhew ever entered. Maybe it was the many burned out light bulbs in the marquee which accounted for their disinterest. Or the dingy lobby with its threadbare red carpet. The Cockney woman in the ornate, gilded ticket booth barely looked up from her romance novel to sell a late customer a ticket. Beside the posters on the front of the theatre, a hooker dressed in a tight, black taffeta outfit, spiked high heels, bright red lipstick, and a long string of paste pearls tried in vain to interest a customer, or anyone who would provide a light for her cigarette. A glimmer of hope came across her face as a cab drove by, slowing as it passed the theatre, and nearly stopped. But the passenger apparently thought better of it and ordered the driver on.

As an elderly couple left the theatre, a bellicose male voice – that of the performer of the moment – wafted through the open doors from the auditorium. Hearing someone exiting the music hall lobby, the hooker looked over her shoulder to see if the disgruntled theatre-goer presented an opportunity for her. But the gent was too old. And his wife had him firmly by the arm, steering him assertively in the other direction. Meanwhile, the voice inside the theatre continued with its monologue and waited for laughter. Only a few titters followed.

'Tell me, ain't I right?' The voice boomed. At the sound of it even the box office woman looked up from her chocolate bar and romance novel. 'A bloke never gets in trouble chasing women – it's *after* they're caught the trouble begins.'

A few men, most of them probably under the influence

of too much drink, released a wave of tepid laughter throughout the audience.

The man on stage was perspiring profusely. Oliver Trumbull had perspired quite often as a young man when he began his career as a comic in the then-popular English music halls. Making a name for himself, he foresaw the end of the music hall, and pursued his true love, classical theatre. His acting talent and melodious voice made him something of a star, and he performed in various repertory companies over the years. But with his advancing age, the roles were fewer, and now he took what jobs he could get in the musical theatre. The times had passed him by – a sad fact which Oliver was not ready to concede, although his audience at the Mayhew was currently making it readily apparent.

His costume, which had once been like a second skin, a trademark by which all such comics distinguished themselves, was now pathetically archaic. His black bowler hat, three-piece Edwardian suit, and gold topped cane was the fashion in 1895 London; but, alas for Oliver, was not about to enjoy a revival in the London of 1985. Nevertheless, Oliver strutted across the stage in front of the equally antique set which consisted principally of a large, wood-hewn table of dark, heavy, ornately carved wood. To offset the heaviness of the table, or perhaps to add light to the set, two candles had been placed off to one side. A gavel gave the setting an air of judicial gravity, which might have indicated a courtroom drama were Oliver not such a caricature. This, then, was the traditional music hall setting where the gavel-wielding 'chairman' presided over the evening's festivities.

Undaunted, Oliver may have assumed his audience mistook him for a judge and was showing him reverence by their quietude. (Though that was an unlikely scenario, and, more likely, wishful thinking on his part.) Hoping to seize on the last titter of laughter, Oliver reached his hand into his baggy trouser pocket and retrieved a folded letter,

which he proceeded to hold up to the footlights for better reading.

'I just got this letter from a man . . .' he began, his voice booming again, as if to awaken the dead, of which there may have been many. He continued, ' . . . says if I don't stay away from his wife, he's going to shoot me.' Here Oliver paused, confounded, and put a finger to his temple. A pause for effect, and then he added, 'Ruddy mess he's put me in – he didn't *sign* it!'

This one may have worked like a gem in the old days, but the gem had gathered too much dust with time, or perhaps these modern day audiences didn't understand his style of humour. Another generation. Too much telly. That would do it, all right.

It took a moment, but a few appreciative members of the audience did finally get the rub of the joke. Oliver paused, praying the laughter might build and deliver him from the throes of his approaching panic. After the slight ripple, he glanced up into the balconies, searching for a lost laugh that never came. Then he leaned over his cane, across the footlights, and spoke to a dozing fellow in the front row.

'Say, mate. Am I keeping you up?'

The man answered with a snore.

'What about you, madame?' he said to the man's wife, who sat beside him. 'Talking loud enough for you, am I?'

The woman waved her hand at him, as if swatting a pest away. Oliver wouldn't leave. He directed his next line to her.

'You like this suit?' he asked, turning about for all the audience to see. 'It was a surprise from my wife. I came home tonight and found it hanging on the back of a chair in the bedroom.'

The woman cackled, laughing at him rather than with him. Oliver tipped his derby slightly over his eyes and peered out into the audience. No wonder the place sounded like a vast cave. There was hardly anything but empty seats out there. Why, a space that was supposed to hold a thousand people hardly had sixty paying customers. And a

very sad lot they were, too. Like the dozing man in the front row, most of the men seemed of the working class sort, probably home from work by way of their pubs. The women didn't look respectable either. A couple of street walkers in feathered hats had come in to rest their feet. Two students from university, not older than twenty or so, had come in just to make fun, only to find themselves already bored. Toward the back, a man who had told his wife he was working late at the office, was stealing kisses off a pretty clerk from Selfridge's department store – who giggled a good deal more than anyone else in the audience, for which Oliver was grateful, though he wished her timing were better.

Oliver had lived this same scene too much lately. He knew there was no salvaging it. Even so, his voice grew louder and louder, as if he could bully the audience into laughing. Beginning to shake, Oliver steadied himself by leaning on his cane and striking a poised stance. He launched into a new joke:

'Friday last I was coming home after tossin' back a few pints. I found this chap trying to jimmy my front door! Can you imagine the cheek of the fellow? I says to him, I says, "I'll strike a bargain with you, mate – I'll open the door if *you* go in *first!*"'

Oliver's toothy smile froze. He sensed he was the only one smiling in the theatre, and he dared not break character to glance over in the wings. It was bad enough trying to put one over on a crowd of dead ones without having to face death in the face – death being the weasel-like face of the Mayhew's owner, the 'chairman,' Archie Weems.

Archie Weems had the pinched look of a man who had hidden from the light most of his life. Though thirty-two years old, Archie's gaunt countenance, full of mean lines, his skin, sallow and pock-marked, and his eyes, dark and darting nervously about, gave him the appearance of an old rat perpetually hunted. He was the sort of man you might guess was full of brag and ambition, but who, in fact, went

home and was hag-ridden by his wife – and if you guessed that, you would be right.

As Oliver's dismal performance was winding to a close, Archie's eyes ferreted out an attractive woman who also watched from the wings. He had to admit his daughter made a pretty picture, sitting beside a cluster of plastic shrubs and classic statuary.

In her late twenties, Kitty Trumbull, bore little resemblance to the pathetic music hall comic who was struggling on the stage. While Archie knew she was a teacher and dedicated to her charges at the Bridgemoor Academy in Manchester, he found it somewhat hard to believe that the daughter of a theatrical personality could be so conservative. She wore a tailored navy blue suit, white blouse, and simple heels. There was nothing in the least bit eccentric about her, unless, of course, you counted her peculiar interest in her father's routine – which no person of Kitty Trumbull's intelligence could view so intently.

Archie Weems lacked the sensitivity to detect the sadness in her eyes. What he really hoped she would notice was him standing beside her.

Oliver made another valiant attempt at winning the lethargic audience over:

'My wife used to shop in three or four stores,' he began. 'The bills were ungodly dear.' At this juncture, he produced a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket to wipe his brow – an effect which was both comic and necessary. 'Now the bills are much smaller. She shops in thirty or forty stores.'

Mild laughter greeted him at last. Oliver seemed like a man in the desert who had felt his first breeze. He continued:

'I said to my wife, I said: "You ought to be in Parliament. You bring so many bills into the house."'

This one died, and Oliver felt himself in need of a tropical wind to refresh him.

'The other day she prances in wearing a new dress. She says, "Oliver, I bought it for a song." I says, "All right love, send over the bill collector. I'll sing to him."'

Again the mild laughter. And the relief.

His spirits somewhat buoyed, Oliver went on:

'Last week my wife says, "How's our financial situation?" I says, "I'm about even." "Even," she says? "Yes," I says. "I owe about as many people as I don't."'

Although the laughing was hardly tumultuous, Oliver was encouraged to go on:

'My brother-in-law, Reginald . . . now there's an opportunist. One day he's got the wolf at the door. The next day his wife's wearing a fur coat. I'll say this, if the wolf comes near my door, I'll lock him in the fridge and the blighter'll starve to death.'

Distressed, Oliver's daughter Kitty bit her lip and wished her father would quit while he was ahead. She hated to see his career end so . . . so . . . ingloriously. Even when she was a little girl, touring England and Scotland with him, the audiences laughed and cheered. But that was another age and she was a woman now . . .

Suddenly she felt an arm slipping around her waist. She started, almost letting out a small scream, and turned to see Archie's crooked grin smiling up at her.

'Hello, Kitty. Bit of a surprise seeing you here.'

She made no effort to smile back, and barely looked at him as she spoke. 'School's on holiday.'

The embrace was all too familiar to her by now. Every time she visited her father in the theatre, Archie made yet another surreptitious move on her from behind, and she was growing quite tired and annoyed with the whole business. Still, he was her father's employer, and she suppressed her anger, subtly shrugging off his embrace.

Her coolness didn't go unobserved by Archie. His tone grew cooler to match hers.

'Your dad seems a bit off the mark tonight.' Looking at Kitty for a reaction, he was disappointed to get nothing of the sort. 'Did he tell you we've had an offer?'

This was another of Archie's bothersome games – she just knew it. She wondered if he was so stupid as to not recall they had had this conversation many times. 'You've

had offers before, Archie.' Then to deflate his puny ambitions, she added a piece of information which was sure to irritate him. '*She* won't sell.'

Archie shook his head. His voice assumed a mournful tone.

'Can't keep up this way.'

'No?' Unable to contain her anger any longer, Kitty felt it bubbling to the surface from the pit of her stomach. 'Somehow I think the "great lady" will still be out on the stage a dozen years from now, singing the same songs – my dad still kissing her pinky ring . . .'

Then, afraid she might say something she would regret – something entirely unbefitting a school mistress – she stopped her tirade, whirled to face Archie squarely, and confronted him with a stare so icy he nearly cowered under it. Without saying another word, or needing to, she strode off towards the recesses of the stage where she made her way past the old painted flats.

Almost to the stage door, Kitty collided with a rotund form which seemed to spring out of the backstage darkness.

'Oh, Miss Kitty. A fine surprise seein' you here.'

Even in the shadows Kitty recognised the garrulous, cheerful voice. It belonged to Bridget O'Hara, life-long dresser and confidante to the Mayhew's half-owner and singing star, Emma Macgill. Kind, effusive, and earthy as Bridget was, Kitty was still burning and had scant time for gossip or chitchat.

'Hello, Bridget,' she said fleetingly as she headed down the steps towards the stage door.

'And how's the little children?' she inquired. 'Learnin' their lessons well, are they?'

Odd, thought Bridget, usually Kitty was ever so much friendlier. What could cause her to be so cold-like? It just wasn't like her. Not like her at all. What with her father being such a gentleman and she being such a young lady, there must be something wrong. But Bridget couldn't fathom what it could be. So she would put it out of her mind, if she could, and get the dress she was carrying to

Emma's dressing room before her next number. Perhaps Emma would know something. Yes, Kitty was odd. Decidedly odd. Scurrying off to Emma's dressing room, she hardly noticed that Oliver was leaving the stage with only the faintest of applause. It was an odd night all around.

CHAPTER TWO

You wouldn't have guessed Oliver gave a second thought to the paltry applause he left behind as he stepped behind the curtain. He wasn't the least bit distressed. Quite the contrary. His big, broad comedian smile, exposing his trademark gap-teeth, was ear to ear.

But one look at Archie, who was anxiously rubbing his palms together and tapping his feet, and Oliver's smile dissolved as quickly as the smattering of applause on the other side of the curtain.

'A house full of ruddy corpses!' Oliver said, his scowl showing just what he thought of them. 'They can damn well do without my encore.'

Judging from the silence in the house, there was not much chance of that going over either – a sad fact of which both Oliver and Archie were well aware. But Archie needed Oliver, if for no other reason than to keep on the good side of Emma, which was reason enough to effect an artifice of good cheer.

A sympathetic pat on the shoulder, a forced smile – the sort one gives an acquaintance who has just passed along some bad news – and Archie, the 'chairman' of the music hall, started towards the proscenium.

'Things'll pick up, Oliver,' he blithely assured him, not really interested in his response.

Oliver gave him one anyway.

'Oh, when's that to be, Archie?' he grumbled loudly. 'Turn of the century?'

Archie stopped dead in his tracks and whirled about.

The pleasant demeanour, suddenly forgotten, gave way to a hard glare.

'Put that in your act, old fella,' he spat back. 'Funniest line you've said tonight.'

Archie brusquely left Oliver standing alone, unable to vent his fury. Removing his bowler hat, Oliver slammed it against the brick wall, immediately regretting the action which left particles of dust across its black velour. Muttering to himself, Oliver wished he had not let Archie get him riled so.

Taking the spotlight in his fine Edwardian attire, Archie stood before the red velvet curtain and displayed not a trace of the fierce gaze of a moment before. All poise, smiles, and good spirits projected from him – a transformation so sudden and indicative of his unsavoury soul Oliver shivered just to hear Archie's words to the audience:

'Oliver Trumbull, ladies and gentlemen – recently returned from a successful engagement in the colonies and brought to this stage at *enormous expense* for your collective titillation.'

Obviously, the jibe was intended for Oliver, whom Archie knew to be listening backstage. It had its desired effect. Oliver winced painfully. Banging the gavel on the desk (which was traditional between acts), Archie continued to charm the audience as best he could. Pounding his gavel on the desk, he announced:

'And now dear friends, the gemstone of our evening's diversion. An interlude of melody from that singular sweetheart of song – that beauteous balladeer: Mistress Emma Macgill.'

His gavel pointed upstage, Archie jauntily alighted from the spotlight as it whipped towards the red velvet curtains behind him. The many folds of the curtains rose slowly, and not without a flair of the dramatic. The orchestra conductor tapped his baton against his music stand, striking up a rousing accompaniment to introduce one of England's most beloved songstresses.

The curtains parted to reveal Emma Macgill – a

commanding picture of a woman: blonde hair, back to the audience, hip jutted out just so to the side, her hand on that hip, and her body draped in a red satin dress which fell to the floor, culminating in an array of ruffles which could have easily dusted the stage with a few sweeping motions of her legs.

Draped around her neck, over her shoulder, down her arm, and along the side of her gown was a full feather boa, which she twirled about her as she spun around to face the audience.

The spotlight caught the sparkle of her eyes, the ruddiness of her cheeks, the cute red bow of a mouth. Her face belonged to a woman in her fifties, but her verve and girlish smile erased years. And when she sang, there was no mistaking the love in her voice. The audience, coarse as they may have been, recognised it at once. They were in the presence of a lady whose passion for her work radiated throughout the theatre.

Emma Macgill knew her way around an English music hall. She wouldn't mind telling you she was every bit as much a landmark as was this theatre. She'd entertained more than one generation with her old standards. Why, even some of these older gentlemen in tonight's audience might have heard her back in the war when she had to pause in the middle of numbers now and then to allow for the bombs exploding. The boys in uniform had always been among her most appreciative fans. Even the King had come to see her more than once.

But no one was ever a greater fan than her Oliver. Ever loyal, he still watched from the wings, never missing a performance. Emma dutifully acknowledged him. During the vamp in her first number, she blew him a kiss into the wings. Oliver blew it back to her. She beamed, kicked up her heels, and danced across the stage, launching into her favourite song, 'In My Fust 'usband's Time,' singing it with a heavy Cockney accent:

When I've 'cleaned' myself and wash'd the kids,

I go aud fetch the beer,
I like to have a friendly chat,
And take in all I hear;
'Oh! laws a mussy me,' I ses,
To my neighbour, Mrs Brown,
'How things is changing every day,
The world seems upside down!'

And when I think of the days that's gone for good,
When a gal in my youth and prime,
I can see as things is different now,
Since my first husband's time.

We've only Coffee Taverns now,
Where public used to be,
And Music Halls you'll find will change,
For *beer* they'll give us *tea!*
The swells at the Theatres laugh,
At naughty jokes they hear.
But then some jokes is wicked,
Where there's smoke and drinking beer!

For whenever we went to a play, my dear,
Or to see a Pantomime,
The girls didn't throw their legs so high,
Not in my first husband's time.

As she acted out the lyric, throwing her legs up, Oliver felt as if he were out there dancing with her. Concluding the second chorus with a rousing voice, Emma felt the enthusiasm coming from the audience, sparse as it was. There's a bit of life in the old gal yet, she thought, spurred on by the spirited reception from the few patrons out there.

Buoyed by their appreciation, she leaned over the footlights and instructed them:

'All right now, everyone! Number seven on your song sheet.'

She pointed a finger at the bald conductor who, lagging

a bit behind cue, managed to pick up the tempo to match Emma's. Getting the small orchestra to play in unison was an achievement on some occasions; so Emma was grateful to have them all playing along as the audience caught up with them.

There was a rustle of papers as the audience looked for the lyrics on their sheets. As Emma sang the next few verses, they waited to join in the chorus. As if lecturing to them, she bent over the lip of the stage and sang:

We all go in for Art, my dear,
To do things wrong we're taught.
For the gents all lets their hair grow long,
While the ladies cut theirs short!
We sprawl upon the floor instead,
Of sitting on our chairs,
At sunflowers, dado's chaney-pots,
We gaze with vacant stares.

Finishing her verses, Emma motioned for the audience to sing the chorus. Their feeble voices joined in with:

For we didn't think an old crack pot 'intense,'
Nor an old blue plate 'sublime,'
For things as a rule was 'blue' enough,
In my first husband's time.

Emma was unruffled by the audience's cacophony of voices, flat, sharp, not keeping time, and sometimes barely louder than their rustling programmes which they strained to read in the dark.

Watching from back stage, Oliver had to hand it to Emma. She had a way of getting them in the palm of her hand. Sadly, he didn't have her knack, and, much as he admired and cared for her, it was hard to see her succeeding where he had failed. While Emma egged them on to sing louder, he turned and walked off.

*

From his cluttered cubicle of an office down the back stairwell, Archie Weems could hear the rousing strains of the orchestra and the fainter sound of the audience. Of the audience, the orchestra, and Emma, only Emma was on key, and the loudest among them as well. What a shame her voice wasn't enough to bring in more than the poor receipts Archie counted out across the top of his cluttered, coffee-stained desk. He noted the tally in his account book. There'd be hell to pay again with Violet for the slim take – of that he could be certain.

He hadn't even shut the ledger when she appeared unannounced in his office. Her face was still done up like the showgirl she had once been. But her girlish looks and chorus line smile had long since disappeared, leaving only hard edges, accentuated by her tight mouth, thin lips, and coal-black eyes. There was not a hint of softness anywhere. Even her dress, a tight-fitting grey suit, bespoke a definite authority. She wasted no steps and no words. A Wilkinson sword – to which her sharp tongue was often compared – had more warmth.

Standing over Archie, Violet flipped open the ledger.

'That it for the night, Archie?'

Intimidated, Archie couldn't find the words to reply.

'Not wearing out your fingers countin', are you?'

He stammered slightly. 'We've done worse, Vi.'

'Did you talk to her?' she demanded.

'I'll get to it.'

'In time for the next coronation?' she asked sarcastically, moving around to the front of the desk to force him to look at her. Leaning across the desk, she added, 'I just came from Danny Briggs. His offer still stands, but he and his partners aren't goin' to wait forever.'

'Don't tell *me*, Vi,' Archie said, mustering a bit of courage. 'It's her ladyship standin' in the way. You know what she says.'

But clearly Violet was not easily dissuaded by his meager defense or excuses.

'Your dad didn't leave you his half of this old mausoleum just so's the tax people could take it away.'

Archie heaved a sigh as Violent relented for a moment. The sound of Emma's voice came wafting down the stairwell.

Violent softened her tone slightly, assuming a calculated air of reason. 'Archie, they stopped wantin' her and her kind of music years ago. A few more months and we'll have nothin'!'

Archie knew there was no fighting his wife. He pushed the account book away from him and sunk back into his desk chair.

'All right,' he grumbled, resignedly. 'I'll talk to her.'

Violet shot him a look, as if to say, 'You'd better if you know what's good for you,' a message which Archie received with all its intended meaning. Her exit, as brusque as her entrance, left a chill behind. He'd felt such a chill before, he couldn't quite remember where.

Then it came to him.

It was in a tomb. That was it. A tomb.

CHAPTER THREE

Hardly minding that the applause was only a ghost of the applause which once filled this theatre, Emma graciously took her bows in the spotlight. The conductor cued her exit music altogether too early for Emma's taste. But perhaps the applause didn't warrant her overstaying her welcome. Smiling warmly, she withdrew behind the curtain where Bridget O'Hara was, according to custom, waiting for her. Emma handed her dresser the boa, also according to custom. Bridget took her place behind her Ladyship as she started along the back wall to her dressing room. Usually Emma had a comment of some sort or another, but tonight her mind was elsewhere. Years as Emma's maid, dresser, and confidante gave Bridget the insight to know Emma was distressed, although the cause of her concern remained a mystery.

She broke her silence only to greet Violet with whom she and Bridget happened to cross paths as they squeezed between a cluster of stage props. Emma couldn't fool Bridget; Bridget sensed the air of forced gaiety in her greeting.

'Evening, Violet,' she smiled. 'A very nice house, don't you think?'

Considerably more transparent in her deferential reply, Violet answered flatly, 'Yes, ma'am. Quite nice.'

Indicating they had little interest in Violet's response, Emma and Bridget continued on into the dressing room. Violet made little effort to conceal her contempt for Emma who, in her opinion, valued a sentimental attachment to a

bygone era more than the potential fortune that could be had for this decaying heap of a theatre. Emma was all that stood in the way of Violet getting the fortune she considered was rightfully hers. There had to be something to make her marriage worthwhile. And Emma knew it, too – and still she flaunted her airs, carrying on like she was some kind of royalty in her palace. A bunch of rubbish it was. And someday, before long, Violet would get hers. After all, Emma couldn't live forever.

While Violet may have regarded Emma as a queen, the dressing room provided for her in the theatre was hardly befitting a court maid. There were pipes criss-crossing the ceiling in every direction, and so many wires and plugs running about the tiny room that you had to be careful so as not to get tangled up in them while turning around. But it was a home of sorts to Emma and Bridget, who moved about in a regular routine. Behind an old painted Japanese screen, Emma slipped out of her red gown and threw it atop the screen. Meanwhile, anticipating her lady's every move, Bridget whisked the dress away, had it on a hangar in no time, and put it away in the mirrored Victorian armoire. Emma still gave no sign of being disappointed by the evening's audience.

'If this weather weren't so ghastly, we'd do ever so much better, don't you think?'

Bridget wondered who it was Emma thought she was trying to fool.

'Right,' she shot back. 'That and have Parliament black out the telly.'

'Bridget, for pity's sake. The television can't compare to the sort of live theatre we provide.'

'You're right about that. But nothing goes on forever. Even old Queen Victoria found that out, she did.'

Bridget busied herself at the makeup table where she arranged Emma's combs and cosmetics. Then came the expected response:

'If you're hinting I should retire . . .'

'Oh, no, mum,' Bridget shook her head, not even both-

ering to look up from her duties. 'I passed by hintin' around six years ago.'

Emma slipped into a Chinese silk robe, a present from an old admirer, and sat down at the dressing table as Bridget stepped aside from the mirror. Try though she might, Bridget, the poor dear, found it difficult to hold her tongue any longer. Perhaps she was speaking out of turn. But it was best to speak and be done with it before she took it out on Emma's hair. Judging from the furious rate at which she was presently running the boar bristle brush through it, Emma would be far better off to get a piece of Bridget's mind than to have to resort to a wig.

'The plain truth is, it's time you packed it in,' Bridget blurted out, then stopped, holding the breath in between her puckered lips as she awaited her lady's reply. 'You ought to start leadin' a proper life while you've still got one to live.'

Emma didn't have a chance to reply. Archie butted in with an unsolicited opinion of his own:

'Couldn't have said it better myself.'

His opinion, and his presence, were neither desired nor appreciated, which was all too plainly clear to Archie as Emma glared into the mirror.

'I didn't hear you knock, Archie,' she said, a wasted reminder that some people in this day and age still observed certain dressing room etiquette.

'Like Bridget said, you hear what you want to hear.'

Yes, the reminder was obviously wasted, and did little to prevent the boorish young man from grabbing a wooden chair, swinging it around next to Emma, and straddling it to face her.

'Nor did I ask you to sit,' she said, more pointedly. Gone was the sweet music hall face. Furiously, she reached for a handful of tissues and began hastily removing her stage makeup.

Archie grinned in hopes of placating her.

'Listen to me, old girl. Me dad and you had a good thing goin', but he's gone now and times have changed.'

Out of respect for Archie's father, Emma's former business partner in the theatre, Emma softened her tone. 'Archie, I know it's been hard, but things will change. You'll see. Give it another few months – at least through summer.'

'We haven't got till summer! We've got an offer now – a *good* offer!'

'No,' she said firmly, facing him squarely, those famous large eyes of hers widening, appearing slightly frightening with their smeared mascara. 'I've never been a quitter and I won't be one now.'

His spirits undermined by her intimidating presence, Archie tried to think of another tack, but was sorely lacking in quick wit or a barrister's ability to think on his feet.

'You've no sense,' he muttered, his face turning beet red with anger. 'None at all.'

Emma met his fury with poise and silence. Pushing himself up from the chair, Archie stalked out of the room, slamming the dressing room door behind him. His heavy steps clopped up the stairwell. Emma, who had all the while been observing Archie's dramatic exit in the mirror, looked up at Bridget for moral support. For a fleeting moment, Bridget's eyes locked with hers, then looked away, giving Emma an uneasy, wary sensation that this time, unlike all the previous ones, their disagreement left an air of doom hanging about the dressing room.

CHAPTER FOUR

The lights outside the Mayhew blinked out, first the marquee bulbs, then those illuminating the posters, and finally the overheads at the theatre entrance. The chocolate-chomping ticket taker had gone home to her one room flat. The hookers had given up, moving on to areas where the traffic wasn't so sparse and the clientele were better off. Only a few cars sped by on their way to or from something, but none of them would be stopping here. The last of the meager audience had scattered to the Underground or taken lifts in what few taxis were to be had in the area.

Inside the empty auditorium, a dim work light cast shadows across the stage. Oliver stood under it, a coat slung over his arm, while he whistled and waited for Emma. In the cold emptiness of the abandoned theatre, his whistles took on an especially hollow sound. The sound of Emma's and Bridget's loud footsteps across the stage boards was suddenly comforting.

'There you are,' Oliver said cheerily. Halting midway, Emma and Bridget returned his smile. The dark didn't take away from Emma's glow. Her full length leopard coat had something to do with accentuating the beauty already there. Bridget felt suddenly out of place, as she usually did in the presence of just the two of them, and she knew it was time to make herself scarce.

'Well, good night, mum,' she said to Emma, backing toward the wings.

'Good night, Bridget.'

Her hat askew, Bridget held onto it and bustled off.

Amused, Oliver and Emma shared a private laugh. A moment later, Oliver gave Emma a quick squeeze and an affectionate kiss on the cheek.

'You were marvellous tonight, Em,' he told her.

'Ollie, you say that every night.'

He laughed again. This time at himself. She was right. He did say that every night. Taking her arm, he steered her towards the wings.

'Thought we'd pop by the Ram's Head.'

Emma saw no objection to visiting Oliver's favourite local pub.

'I could use a pint,' she said. Then it occurred to her that something was strange about the suggestion. She paused, momentarily perplexed. 'Where's Kitty? Didn't I see her backstage? Is she in from Manchester?'

'School's on holiday for a week.'

Emma couldn't help being bothered that Kitty didn't care to join them. 'I wish she liked me better, Ollie.'

'Nonsense,' he said. 'She adores you.'

It was nice of Ollie to try assuring her, but she thought he was merely being his usual kind self. Oliver read the disappointment in her face when they came to the stage door. Something else seemed to be troubling her, something of a more serious nature than whether or not his daughter was fond of her.

'We've all heard about the Briggs' offer,' he said, hoping he had broached the topic gingerly enough.

'I expect the *world* knows about it.'

So he was right. No wonder she was so distressed. It must seem that everything she had worked for was slipping away from her. The least Oliver could do was offer a little comfort.

'Look, Em. I've got a bit put aside – not much, but enough.' She tried to stop him from going on, but he continued. 'You've given forty years to *them*,' he added, gesturing towards the stage. 'It's about time you thought about yourself – and me.'

Touched by his sentiments, Emma took his hand gently and placed it in hers.

'Ollie, I do love you. Really, I do. That's why I'm going to do you the favour of *not* marrying you.'

'That sounds a bit warped.'

'I don't want to turn two dear friends into a couple of snarling alley cats.' She looked about the theatre, her eyes misting up. '*This* is our life, not tending roses at some cottage in Dorchester.'

'Em . . .' Oliver tried putting in.

'Now be a dear,' she shushed him. 'Not another word.'

And with that, she swung the door open. Oliver knew better than to keep at her. He could only shrug, take the door, and defer to her with a sweeping courtly bow that bade her precede him into the alley. Together they stepped out into the dimly lighted alley, dominated by fire escapes and garbage cans.

'Be on your guard, madame,' Oliver warned her. 'I do not consider this matter closed.'

She smiled, finding his word of caution charming and endearing. Suddenly he stopped. His face went blank and he frantically searched his pockets.

'Damn, I've left my wallet inside.' How like him, Emma thought, to forget his wallet, whereas he would never think of forgetting a prop on stage. Understanding, she shook her head sympathetically. 'Excuse me,' he said. 'Back in a jiffy.'

Oliver turned and hurried back inside the stage door as Emma watched after him. Alone in the desolate lane, she felt the weight of the day's events bearing down on her and took a deep, relaxing breath.

Suddenly from behind her, she heard a noise. A car, she thought. Whatever it was, she felt the fear welling up inside of her. Where was Oliver?

A tin dust bin clattered on the alley's cobblestones, then went flying with a horrific crunching sound against the brick wall of the theatre. Perhaps someone was throwing dust bins about, she thought.

Almost too late, she caught the glare of the headlights coming round the bend of the theatre – and not straight-away down the alley either, but directly at her.

The wheels squeeled. Hurry, Oliver. She wanted to shout. But the famous voice would not come. She wanted to run. But her legs failed her.

The car, a small, black foreign make, was bearing down on her.

She wasn't sure how it happened, but her legs moved, the terror sparking them to life just in time for her to leap off to one side. The car swerved, banging into a row of dust bins. Then a loud squeal of rubber against the alley stones and it was gone.

Emma fell to the ground, banging her knee on the pavement.

'Emma!' Oliver cried.

Hearing the commotion, he burst out the stage door to see a blurred image of the car racing away. He found Emma lying against the side of the theatre and, bending over, lent her a hand as she struggled to get to her feet.

'Emma,' he said, concerned.

'I'm all right.'

Emma appraised her torn stocking and her scraped knee, then surveyed her leopard coat for damages. Thank goodness, there was only a bit of dirt, which she attempted to brush off. Oliver seemed much more concerned about the entire affair than she.

'I'm going to ring up the police,' he told her.

'No, it was nothing,' she said, treating the whole matter lightly. 'Just a drunk driver. Now stop fretting and buy me that pint.'

Jovial as ever, she started off down the alley, leaving Oliver frozen in his tracks, dumbfounded. The idea of calling the police didn't seem so foolish to him, no matter what Emma thought of it; still, he'd accede to her wishes, keep them out of it. No use begging for trouble. Then again, no telling what trouble might be on her heels if this was more than the accident she wanted to believe it was.

CHAPTER FIVE

Chelsea is London's 'Latin Quarter.' Today most Londoners regard King's Row – a chic, congested street just to the north-west of Central London, and very near the Thames – as the heart of the area. It is King's Row which attracts the young punks trying to outdo each other with their outrageous dress; fashion designers selling their latest creations in boutiques; and daring restauranteurs operating international cafés. But most of the actual residents are older, or at least financially well established; for Chelsea is among the city's most stately, expensive neighbourhoods. Since the days of King Henry VIII when Sir Thomas More built his house here, Chelsea has attracted the rich and the powerful, including King Henry himself. In the nineteenth century, Chelsea's beautiful gardens, the Cheyne Walk along the Thames, and its location away from Central London, drew artists who formed an enclave here. Its most famous personalities included the likes of the painters Whistler and Sargent, and the writers Oscar Wilde and Bram Stoker.

Emma Macgill took her flat on Chelsea Road thirty years ago – when Chelsea was Bohemian, but before it was quite so lively or expensive. Of course, she had been drawn into the area by its parks, charming walks, fruit barrows, quaint Victorian mailboxes, and beautiful homes. But mostly she loved it for its people – fellow artists like herself who she often worked with in the theatre.

Emma woke up to a brilliant Chelsea morning. The sun broke over the gardens, trees, and flowers of Chelsea. Neat

rows of older, stately-looking houses and flats – most of them on Emma's street going back to Queen Victoria's reign – came to life as their inhabitants scurried forth to begin their work day.

The outside of Emma's building was of brown stone, accented with colourful window boxes and a stained glass door in the hall. Emerging from the building, Emma spryly lighted down the steps to the street.

Her car, an old green Austin (admittedly on the smallish side) was like an old friend which – despite persistent warnings from friends about her being too 'delicate' to drive a small car in these dangerous modern roads – Emma steadfastly refused to part with.

Her mind was very much on the car that morning as she noted that the engine took a little more coaxing than usual to turn over. It was true. The car was getting old. Or at least 'delicate,' she preferred to think. The thought of being without the Austin suddenly saddened her. Then she caught herself being sentimental. How foolish to get so worked up over a piece of tin. With a few gentle turns of the ignition key and some careful priming, the engine kicked to life. Emma smiled. Glancing in her rearview mirror, she waited for the morning commuters to pass, then pulled out into traffic.

There was no apparent reason she should have paid any attention to the white Rolls Royce parked further down her block. But she did notice it. The driver of the car, who maintained a watchful eye on Emma and her Austin through his windshield, was keenly interested in Emma's movements. He had less trouble starting the Rolls' ignition – and what trouble he had was only in clasping the ignition key with his thin, kid leather touring gloves.

Moments later, the white Rolls glided alongside the Austin, but only momentarily before dropping back. Emma seemed distracted, in another world, oblivious to as simple a danger as a driver following too closely behind her.

*

The last thing Jessica Fletcher expected to hear about that day was her cousin Emma.

Her mind was absorbed with important matters, such as where did she put the new vacuum cleaner bags. Even tidying her simple house had its little mysteries, Jessica mused. There was probably no surer way to feel further removed from England than to throw oneself into an afternoon of spring cleaning in Cabot Cove. The small Maine coastal town was now as much a home to Jessica as her native England had once been. Certainly, she looked very much at home, done up in her faded jeans, a moth-eaten old blue sweater, and a red bandana wrapped about her untidy blond hair. Anyone catching a glimpse of her through the parlour window would have thought she was attacking the rug with great concentration. In fact, her thoughts invariably strayed to the plot of her latest mystery that sat in her old typewriter awaiting her return. Among Jessica's many theories was that cleaning cleared the mind as well as the home – which may have explained her fervor in vacuuming the oriental rug.

Gathering from the scattered cleansing paraphernalia lying about – rags, buckets, window spray, a feather duster, and furniture polish – Jessica's latest plot was more complicated than ever she had anticipated. No matter how many mysteries she wrote, she could never get over how frustrating it was when she backed herself into a corner this way, figuratively speaking. But it was precisely because she backed herself into so many corners – then so ingeniously extricated herself – that her fans loved her so.

The vacuum cleaner drowned out almost all awareness of the outside world; that is until the ring of the phone became so loudly persistent that Jessica was jarred back into reality. She wondered how long she had let it ring before she switched off the vacuum and hurried to pick up the receiver.

'Yes?' she said over the fuzzy connection on the wires. 'Yes, this is Jessica Fletcher.' It was obvious from all that static that this was a very long distance call, probably overseas. 'Who?' she shouted into the mouthpiece. 'I'm sorry I'm having trouble hearing you.'

The caller, one Ernest Fielding, a London solicitor, was having an equally difficult time hearing her. Mr Fielding, an impressive looking figure of a man of about thirty-eight, was calling from his office in Fleet Street, not far from the law courts, The Temple, and the Inns of Court – – the centre of London's judicial system. In appearance and tone, Ernest Fielding suited his surroundings. His office was of dark oak with leather furniture, brass fittings, and shelves of legal books.

Standing by his desk beside a high window, he overlooked the throngs of neatly suited solicitors like himself leaving their offices in the evening rush hour.

'So sorry,' Fielding said, raising his voice. 'Ernest Fielding here. Mrs Fletcher. I'm a solicitor representing – uh – Miss Emma Macgill.'

Jessica paused. The awkward hesitation in his voice was curious. 'Cousin Emma?' she asked. 'I haven't seen her in years.'

Fielding cleared his throat. His tone became sombre.

'I'm afraid, Mrs Fletcher, I am the bearer of distressing news. Miss Macgill was involved in a fatal car accident two days ago.'

'Oh, Lord,' Jessica gasped. She could hardly believe it.

'She'd been travelling out in the country,' Fletcher explained. 'Her car went off a bridge. There was no witnesses so we really can't say precisely how it happened.'

Jessica couldn't find her voice. Her usually twinkling eyes welled up with tears.

'Look here, Mrs Fletcher,' Fielding said sympathetically. 'I realise this is something of an imposition, but in her will, Emma specifically requested that you attend the services. They're scheduled for a day after tomorrow.'

'Yes, of course. I'll make reservations immediately.'

'Very good of you. Let me know your flight number and I'll pick you up at the airport. Good-bye.'

Fielding hung up the phone. That was much easier than

even he'd expected. Now he only hoped Jessica would fit into the rest of the plans just as easily.

CHAPTER SIX

Against the deep blue of the Atlantic Ocean, the emerald green of the British Isles – first Ireland, and then England – appeared outside the window of Jessica's plane. A few moments later, the plane was over London, a sight which, among other things, reminded her of how, as a child, she had imagined herself to be Peter Pan soaring over the city. She was glad to be home, although she wished it were for happier reasons.

As Jessica disembarked from her 747 with its cargo of tourists and made the long trek down the exit ramp to the customs area, it occurred to her that Heathrow Airport had to be the biggest, if not the busiest air terminal in the world. It was a long walk from the plane to the gate. At least the British efficiency of the immigration officials speeded up the process of reaching the passenger reception area. Unable to find a familiar face, she made her way to the baggage claim.

Danny Briggs would have known her anywhere. He didn't need to be carrying her latest book in hand, with its photo of Jessica on the cover. Undoubtedly, Danny, who regarded himself as an important young music impressario, felt the need to flaunt his Italian designer clothes, fastidiously groomed, thin body – and intelligence; hence, the book. But Danny wasn't the man for whom Jessica was searching as she stood, appearing lost in the airport transportation area.

Catching Jessica by surprise, Danny intercepted her,

attempting to charm her with his warm smile and working class accent.

'Mrs Fletcher?'

'Why, yes.'

'Danny Briggs,' he said, extending his hand. 'I was acquainted with your late cousin in a business way. Welcome to London.'

This seemed very peculiar indeed to Jessica, although she remained calm and cordial. 'Thank you, Mr Briggs.'

Briggs proceeded to hand her his card, which she examined as if it were evidence.

'I was hopin' you might spare me a few minutes – before you get tangled up with the solicitors.' The quizzical expression on Jessica's face was plain to him. 'I'd like to talk to you about the Mayhew.'

'The Mayhew?' Jessica queried, wondering what the old theatre could have to do with her.

Danny caught her note of surprise. 'You haven't been told then? The music hall. You're comin' into half of it.'

'Really? I had no idea. But how did you . . .'

'I have my ways. Look, you'll be partners now with Archie Weems. I'm prepared to make you both a sweet offer for the place, more than it's worth.'

'Mr Briggs, I'm sorry. I've come for the services and, frankly, until I talk to Mr Fielding, this conversation is premature.'

Just then a car pulled up to the kerb beside them. No ordinary car, either.

It was a white Rolls Royce.

The door of the Rolls opened. Out popped Ernest Fielding, who needed merely a moment of scanning the crowd to pick out Jessica and interrupt her discussion with Mr Briggs.

Danny hesitated as he glimpsed Fielding coming towards them. He shot him a cold smile.

'We'll talk again, mum,' he told Jessica, backing away and hurrying back into the terminal. Jessica watched him

go, not understanding why he had departed so suddenly. She started at the sound of the voice behind her.

'Mrs Fletcher . . .' Jessica jumped slightly. 'Sorry. Did I startle you?' Offering his hand by way of introduction, he added, 'Ernest Fielding.'

'I'd about given you up for lost,' she said, relieved to see him at last.

'Let me take that,' he smiled, taking her bag. 'My car's here at the kerb.'

Jessica followed him to the Rolls. Mr Fielding was a much younger, more handsome man than she had expected. Emma must have done well to be able to afford so successful a solicitor.

Fielding couldn't help noticing the strong resemblance between Jessica and her cousin Emma, though he thought better than to allude to it. Besides, Jessica must have tired of hearing the comparison. 'It's a great pleasure to meet you,' he said. 'I only wish the circumstances were different.'

'Believe me, so do I.'

Opening the boot of the car, he put her bag inside and closed it, then went round to the rear door and opened it for her.

'Oh, no,' she protested politely. 'I'd rather sit up front.'

'I'd prefer you sit in back.'

'Now, Mr Fielding,' she said teasingly. 'You're not my chauffeur. It'll be much easier to chat.'

Jessica reached for the front door handle and felt Fielding's hand over hers as he moved in to stop her. Gone was her coquettish look as she gazed at him sharply, and not without a fair degree of suspicion. His tone abruptly turned firm.

'I really do insist.'

Jessica was weighing the situation in her mind when she heard a familiar voice from inside the car:

'Jessica, please.'

A woman's voice.

Not unlike her own. How could it be, she wondered? Only one woman had a voice like . . .

Emma.

But Emma . . .

Her face tightening with anxiety, Jessica leaned into the rear of the car. Seated inside was a woman of about her stature. Her face was covered with a long, black mourner's veil. Squinting into the darkness of the back seat, Jessica watched as the woman raised her veil. There was no longer any doubt. It was Emma. Emma Macgill. Jessica blanched markedly.

Emma was alive, and smiling at her.

'Hello, cousin. Welcome to London.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

'You've put me through a terrible two days.'

Relieved though she was to see Emma alive, if somewhat distressed, Jessica could not let this prank slip by without scolding her for the anguish she had caused.

Penitent, Emma glanced out of the car window while they rounded the Lord Nelson monument in Trafalgar Square. The ubiquitous pigeons swarmed everywhere, particularly seeming to flock to the steps of the National Gallery. Traffic was moving briskly. Leaving the square behind, they headed down towards the Strand, then passed the Old Admiralty, the red-uniformed Queen's Horse Guards, the 16th Century Palace of Whitehall, and Downing Street.

'I'm sorry, Jessica,' Emma apologised. 'But I couldn't let anyone know. It was too dangerous.'

'Dangerous?' Jessica screwed up her face like a question mark. 'Emma, what is going on?'

Emma sighed, 'Someone's trying to kill me.'

'Oh, Lord.' Although murder was her avocation – in a manner of speaking – Jessica was always startled if someone close to her was involved.

'The first attempt was two weeks ago,' Emma told her. 'My gas heater exploded just after I got back from church. The following Sunday evening a rug was loosened at the top of the staircase. I barely managed to keep from falling. And this past Saturday, someone tried to run me down outside the theatre.'

At the mention of each new incident, Jessica considered the facts and searched for a pattern.

'Are you sure these weren't just accidents?' she inquired.

'Three mishaps on three successive weekends? Not likely, love. I knew if I didn't do something, come next Sunday, I'd be a couple of paragraphs in the *Times* obituaries. That's why, with Ernest's help, I put my car over a bridge into a river near Portsmouth. No one knows I'm alive. Just the three of us.'

'Emma, this is foolish,' Jessica chided. 'You've got to go to the police.'

'And tell them what? Without proof, they'd write me off as a batty old lady gone off the deep end.'

Much as she hated to admit it, Jessica weighed the circumstances and concluded that Emma had a very good point indeed. While it was always best to go to the police, merely as a precaution, it could also muck things up terribly. A shame how little discretion there was in police departments, these days.

Having spent what seemed like much of the day twisting and turning from one side of London to the other, Jessica and Emma were glad to come to a halt somewhere, even if it was the South London working class section of Streatham, part of the borough of Lambeth. Fielding pulled the car up to the curb in front of a drab flat. Jessica was struck by how colourless everything was here, including the ashen, doughy faces of the residents. Certainly Mr Fielding must have some explanation as to why they were stopping here, of all places.

He did. 'Emma is safe here. I've leased this flat under an assumed name.'

Jessica nodded her understanding of the situation. Yes, the neighbourhood looked safe enough at a cursory appraisal, but it was hard for her to imagine a theatrical, colourful personality like Emma living in any place where the grey washed over everything like an ominous cloud.

Inside, Emma's flat was less cold, thanks largely to a few of Emma's personal touches. She poured tea from a

Japanese tea service as if nothing in the world were the matter. Her solicitor was less insouciant, surreptitiously glancing out the window, a gesture which didn't escape Jessica's hawk-like eye.

'If it's so safe, Mr Fielding, why do you keep looking out the window?'

'I'm a prudent man, Mrs Fletcher.'

Emma laughed cheerfully. 'Carries an umbrella every day, even when the sun's bright as a tuppence.' Her assessment of Fielding's personal habits did little to assuage Jessica's uneasiness. 'One lump or two?' Emma asked her.

Jessica waved the sugar bowl away. 'Just a little lemon, please.'

'We're quite sure that whoever's behind these attempts is frustrated by Emma's refusal to sell the music hall,' Fielding elaborated quite matter-of-factly. 'That would include her partner, Archie Weems, his wife, Violet, Oliver Trumbull . . .'

'Ridiculous,' Emma scoffed. 'Oliver couldn't possibly want to kill me.'

'But he might wish to *frighten* you,' Fielding put in. Jessica noted how his legal mind was as suspicious as her writer's mind. Fielding continued: 'He knows as long as you own the Mayhew, you have no intention of retiring.'

'I refuse to believe any such thing.' Emma turned to Jessica to deliver her own opinion of the matter. 'If you ask me, it's that man Briggs.'

'Briggs? *Daniel* Briggs?' Jessica queried.

Fielding was startled by her apparent acquaintance with the man in question. 'Why, yes. You know him?'

'He was waiting for me at the airport – to make an offer for my share of the music hall which he said I had inherited after Emma's – uh – death.'

Jessica took a sip of tea and quickly put it down. Much too hot just now.

'Yes, I'm afraid that's my fault,' Emma's solicitor explained.

Emma interjected vociferously. 'But *my* idea. I asked

Ernest to put it about that you'd be the new owner. That way I felt you'd have a better chance of rooting out whoever's behind all this.'

Once again Jessica's temper flared at Emma's insensitivity. Much as she loved her, it was quite incredible that her cousin was myopic where others were concerned, especially when they could so readily become unwitting pawns in a perilous game.

'Emma, you've set me up!'

'No, love,' Emma cooed, taking her hand in hers and patting it. 'I've merely put you in a position to learn something. Set you up, indeed. What a ghastly idea.'

To Jessica, who stared at her cousin in disbelief, there was no question she was a target, and Emma was more than myopic to think otherwise or attempt to excuse her actions by twisting the facts into euphemisms.

Suddenly Fielding, feeling the awkwardness in the room, appointed himself as mediator, deciding they get on with the important details. 'I've scheduled a memorial service at the music hall tomorrow morning,' he informed Jessica in tones of a legal pronouncement not to be disputed. 'I'm hopeful your appearance will stir the waters.'

Jessica nodded obligingly. She had heard and seen quite enough for one afternoon. This was more intriguing than the plot of her latest novel. All the while, she had been sifting through the pieces of this puzzle and had come to at least one decision. Putting down her cup of tea, she rose from the worn chintz chair and checked her watch.

'Look, it's getting late. Mr Fielding, instead of my hotel, I'd appreciate a lift to Scotland Yard.'

Emma was stunned by her suggestion. 'The police. Oh, no, Jessica,' she objected. 'Don't trust 'em. Never did.'

'Well, I know one *I* can trust, Emma, and if I'm going to set sail on your *Titanic*, at least let me provide my own life preserver.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

New Scotland Yard was built in 1967, and bore little resemblance to the Scotland Yard of Sherlock Holmes legend and lore. It was a modern government building like any other, except for its size – which spanned nearly one-third of the block of Victoria Street between Horseferry and Westminster Abbey. Only by night did the surrounding older edifices of Westminster lend New Scotland Yard some of the character bestowed upon it by a century of legends.

Jessica was well acquainted with the Yard – both old and new – and frequently had cause to use it in her mysteries. Often she had turned to her old friend, Inspector Kyle, as a source of information or advice. There was nothing like a working detective to provide just the right touch of authenticity, the sort which no reference book could furnish. At the moment, she hoped Inspector Kyle could offer more than research material.

It had been a while since Jessica had last seen the Inspector, though she did recall the exact location of his office in the Yard, the door of which happened to be closed and locked. Hearing someone in the office next door, she found a man in shirtsleeves, at his desk, and tossing darts at a pock-marked poster of one of England's ten most wanted criminals. The glass pane on the Inspector's door identified him as Roger Crimmins. The ruddy-faced Londoner in his mid-forties failed to notice Jessica standing in the doorway.

'Excuse me,' she said, rapping to get his attention.

Somewhat embarrassed to be caught out of character,

Crimmins, obviously flustered, hurriedly got to his feet, and slipped on his suit jacket to make himself more presentable.

'May I help you, madame?'

'I was looking for Inspector Kyle. His office is locked up.'

'Henry's off on holiday, I'm afraid. Something I might do for you?' He smiled and offered his hand. 'Inspector Crimmins.'

Hesitant to trust anyone but her friend Henry, Jessica mulled the matter over briefly before turning to leave. 'Uh, no, I don't think so. Thanks, anyway.'

As she stepped out of his door frame Crimmins scrutinised her face. He wondered where he had seen her before. She wasn't wanted for anything was she? Of course not. He had it!

'J. B. Fletcher!' he shouted, pleased with himself.

Jessica stepped back into his line of vision.

'Thought I knew that face. Minute you walked in the door. Henry's told me so much about you; say's you're quite a peach –'

Jessica had been called many things. But 'quite a peach?' – not in recent memory. The thought amused her greatly. Inspector Crimmins was not without his charm.

'Why thank you,' she smiled graciously.

'Takes a bit to earn Henry's admiration. Look here, Mrs Fletcher, are you sure there isn't something I can do for you?'

'It was nothing *official*, Inspector, and I'm sure you must be very busy.'

Crimmins' already rosy face flushed suddenly red as he glowered as if insulted. 'Not bloody likely. New superintendent – arrogant young pup – Cambridge type – trying to force me into retirement before I'm properly pensioned.' He caught himself ticking off his woes to this distinguished woman, then stopped himself. Why in the world would she be interested? Then it occurred to him: What could she be wanting from a Scotland Yard Inspector, unless it was . . .

'I say,' he said, thoughtfully, 'you haven't stumbled in here with a murder, have you?'

'Well, not exactly,' she offered tentatively. 'I mean, not *yet*.'

Crimmins was well pleased with himself for having extracted that much information out of her. 'Now that sounds properly ominous.' It was plain to see he was intrigued, and found Jessica as charming as she found him. Indicating a chair, he motioned, 'Sit down, dear lady, and tell me what I can do to help.'

Jessica hoped she was right to stay. Mr Crimmins seemed like an all right fellow who appreciated a challenge. Why not, she thought to herself, and scooted into the chair.

CHAPTER NINE

The next day, dawn broke over the rooftops of London with a fiery brilliance, the oranges in the morning sky reflected against long trails of smoke pouring forth from chimneys and smokestacks. Lorries were already making their way across the various bridges on the Thames. In the fruit market stalls, farmers from the counties and villages outside London unloaded their fresh produce. Street sweepers in their tank-like argonauts brushed the debris from the public squares and small lanes.

In the quaint residential hotel where Jessica was staying in Mayfair, across from a small park, the doormen conducted their own version of the changing of the guard. Upstairs in her comfortable, brightly decorated suite, Jessica sipped a cup of English breakfast tea and prepared some remarks at a typewriter loaned to her by the accomodating concierge. She'd written many things in her distinguished career, but nothing like an eulogy for a family member who she knew to be alive and well in Streatham. She glanced at her watch. It might just take her until ten o'clock to find the appropriate words . . .

A large crowd of Emma's friends and admirers gathered at the Mayhew Music Hall that morning to pay tribute to the late, lamented star of the musical stage. As they took their seats, many of them did a double-take at the life-sized full-length portrait of Emma in costume. Even with its black border, the likeness appeared hauntingly realistic. Sprays of floral decorations flanked the portrait. A few feet

away was a lectern, and behind it were a cluster of folding chairs, half of them filled with mourners.

Off to the side of the stage a professionally sombre minister who doubtless specialised in memorials conferred privately with Archie Weems, whose unsavoury appearance was hardly improved upon by an out-of-fashion, dark, pinstriped suit. Earlier, Violet, who sported the latest in black mourning apparel, had let him know exactly what she thought of his attire, and reminded him that there would be important people at the service who needed to be impressed. Having spent the best part of the morning briefing Archie, Violet was now instructing the organist, who seemed proficient enough with the dirge-like music without her advice.

Oliver sat in silence downstage, comforted by his daughter Kitty. He removed a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed the tears from his eyes. Kitty squeezed his other hand. Oliver acknowledged her understanding gesture with a smile, and returned the kindness by squeezing her hand, all the while struggling against his emotions to maintain a brave front, stiff upper lip, and all that.

Bridget, a good Catholic who never missed Mass – even when on the road with Miss Emma – had found solace in her rosary beads, fingering them as her lips moved silently. Bridget seemed entirely unaware of the others around her.

Considerably more nervous than she was at her last public reading of her work, Jessica, accompanied by Fielding, approached the lectern. She wore a light, simple grey wool suit and a large black scarf around her neck. Fielding steadied her as she climbed the steps to the stage.

A hush fell over the theatre. Eyes turned. The mourners gaped. Jessica was a dead ringer for Emma.

Violet gasped. The organist was so taken aback he stumbled over his chords and had to stop playing. Thinking the visitation a miracle, Bridget dropped her rosary beads which snapped and clattered to the floor. Dumbfounded,

the minister signaled to Archie, who curiously glanced over his shoulder and turned white, as if seeing a ghost.

'Lord help us,' he muttered. 'Emma.'

Shocked, Oliver rose slowly from his chair. Kitty, who was no less startled, studied Jessica with a school mistress' suspicious eye, then turned to her father, a look of concern on her face. Hardly aware of his movements, Oliver shuffled across the stage to confront Jessica and Fielding. Kitty followed closely behind.

Fielding was his usual dry self. 'Good morning, Trumbull,' he intoned, completely insensitive to Oliver's state. 'Allow me to introduce Mrs Jessica Fletcher, Emma's cousin from the United States.'

Slowly, Oliver was roused from his fog. 'How do you do,' he said, taking Jessica's hand. 'I'm sorry . . . I . . . Forgive me. For a moment I thought . . .'

Jessica smiled warmly. 'I'm delighted to meet you, Mr Trumbull. I wish it were under different circumstances.'

Not yet fully recovered, Oliver stammered. 'Yes, yes. Quite. You will excuse me.'

With that, Oliver moved off towards his seat as Kitty and Jessica watched him.

'Forgive my father, Mrs Fletcher. Your resemblance to Emma is remarkable. Almost frightening. He and Emma were very close.'

'So I understand,' Jessica nodded.

Apparently preoccupied with the arrangements, Fielding moved toward the wings, muttering a quick, 'Excuse me, will you?' to Jessica and Kitty.

Awkwardly, Kitty introduced herself with a shy, 'I'm Kitty Trumbull.'

'I'm very pleased to meet you, Kitty,' said Jessica.

Since the beginning of Jessica's conversation with Oliver and Kitty, Archie Weems' eyes had been straying from the minister and towards them with highly peaked interest. Archie could scarcely wait to pull himself away from the painfully dull parson to bend Fielding's ear. Grabbing the solicitor by the arm, he whispered loudly:

'That's a bit of a shocker, Fielding. She looks enough like Emma to be her sister. Look here,' he added, steering Fielding off to one side. 'Have you talked to her – about the place, I mean? Is she going to sell?'

Fielding's attitude was detached and cool. 'Aren't you jumping the gun a bit, Weems? May I remind you, nothing can be done about the will until Emma's body is recovered.'

'Recovered? Man, she was swept out to sea by that river. They may *never* find her body.'

Weems' raised voice did not escape the attentive ears of Inspector Crimmins, who emerged from the backstage area.

'Excuse me, may I have your attention please!'

Everyone granted him the stage as all eyes turned toward the inspector.

'Forgive the incursion,' he continued apologetically. 'I am Inspector Roger Crimmins of Scotland Yard. I should like to speak to the next of kin of the late Miss Emma Macgill.'

Upon which, all eyes shifted from the inspector to Jessica, who did her utmost to appear equally surprised by the unexpected visitor. Stepping forward, she said:

'I'm her cousin, Inspector. Jessica Fletcher.'

Shrewdly, the inspector looked her up and down as though he'd never laid eyes on the woman before. For once, even Fielding seemed momentarily rattled as he interposed himself between the Scotland Yard man and Jessica. Clearing his throat – the way he had seen many of his English movie idols do in Sherlock Holmes films – Crimmins spoke with the booming timbre of authority in his voice:

'Mrs Fletcher, I regret to tell you that Miss Macgill's body was recovered early this morning on the beach near Portsmouth.'

The faces of the mourners registered that this was an odd coincidence indeed. Fielding played right into the Inspector's scheme.

'Inspector, there's no doubt?'

'There's always a doubt. That's why I must ask Mrs Fletcher to accompany me to identify the body.'

Suddenly Fielding introduced himself with an official air that rivaled Higgins' posturing. 'Ernest Fielding, Inspector. Miss Macgill's solicitor. I should like to spare Mrs Fletcher that ordeal. Permit *me* to make the identification.'

'As you wish,' he consented without argument.

Fletcher started offstage with Higgins only to be intercepted by the distraught Bridget O'Hara.

'Beggin' your pardon, Mr Fielding.' Awkwardly, she identified herself. 'Bridget O'Hara. I rang you up twice yesterday.'

'Oh, yes,' Fielding recalled.

'I don't wish to appear unseemly, sir, but the mistress promised I'd be remembered after she was gone.'

True, the woman was upset, but Fielding was in no mood to tolerate such inappropriate behaviour. 'Miss O'Hara,' he said brusquely, 'this is neither the time nor the place. Excuse me.'

And he was off with Crimmins, leaving Bridget behind, frustrated. Although solicitor Fielding did not want to deal with the likes of Bridget O'Hara, there were others less forthright who were just as keenly interested in the disposition of Emma Macgill's estate.

Jessica wondered just when they would make their interest known. And how. *That* was by far the more intriguing question.

CHAPTER TEN

The eulogy came off as well as could be expected, particularly considering the preoccupation of the mourners with the previous events in the music hall. Most of them lingered on the stage after it was over; as for Jessica, she slipped away unnoticed to Emma's dressing room.

Perhaps the drawer in the makeup table would yield some scrap of evidence to indicate who was behind the plot to kill Emma. Mostly, the drawer was filled with a mess of junk: eyebrow pencils, pancake makeup, liners, an assortment of odd pins, and a rabbit's foot. Bent over intently as she was, and sorting through the contents of the drawer, Jessica didn't see Bridget, who stood in the doorway, looking suspiciously at her.

'Didn't waste any time takin' over, did you?'

Startled, Jessica looked up and quickly assumed command of the situation.

'I'm not *taking over*, Miss O'Hara.'

Bridget made herself at home and walked into the room. 'No skin off my nose, as they say. You'll be getting it all anyway, except that which is specified for others – those of us what was *close* to her.'

Bridget's attitude made two things clear to Jessica: The dresser didn't consider Jessica to be close to Emma; and, Bridget O'Hara bore her a good deal of resentment.

'Believe me,' Jessica stated sincerely, 'I'm not here to take anything.'

'More than thirty years I tended to her wants, but I suppose blood's thicker than water, as they say.'

Yes, clearly resentful. But Jessica couldn't blame the woman really. After all this time, the loss had to come hard. An older woman such as Bridget O'Hara would be terribly frightened about her own future, and not without just cause either. A dresser's entire life was dependent on her star.

'Miss O'Hara,' Jessica began, shutting the door so others couldn't hear. 'Bridget,' she added, putting them on more intimate terms. 'I know you were loyal to my cousin. I feel I can trust you.' Jessica gave Bridget a moment to let this sink in, and with luck the dresser would return her trust. 'Last week, Emma phoned me. She told me that she'd nearly been killed in a series of – accidents.'

Bridget continued to take it all in without batting an eye.

'You don't seem surprised,' Jessica remarked.

Bridget shook her head. 'I said we were close, mum. I knew things were happenin', even when she wouldn't talk about it. It started a few weeks back – right after she got the offer to sell the place.'

'To Mr Briggs?'

'Danny Briggs, as poor a piece of work as God ever made,' Bridget said, spitting out his name with disgust. Jessica thanked the good Lord that Bridget seemed on her side. 'Impressario, he calls himself. Young hustler, if you asks me. Wants to turn this lovely old place into a rock palace, I thinks they call it. Naturally, "herself" wouldn't consider such a thing.'

'Archie Weems must have been furious,' Jessica observed.

Bridget was trying to anticipate where Jessica's thoughts might be taking her. 'And are you suggestin' Archie's a killer? Not likely. Wouldn't have the stomach for it. But his wife, Violet,' she said, lowering her voice as if Violet might possibly overhear, 'a real Lady Macbeth, she is.' Bridget would have gone on gossiping had Jessica not interjected.

'I don't suppose you saw or heard anything specific – a threat – something like that . . .'

The bond of trust Jessica had worked so hard to establish

and, she thought, with success, immediately dissipated with her inquiry. A curtain came down over Bridget's face as her eyes narrowed; without further ado, she headed for the door.

'Beggin' your pardon, mum. You look like "herself," no question, but the sort of questions you ask, you *sound* more like a copper.'

As Bridget bustled out, she left Jessica behind, staring at her in confounded amazement.

On her way to the stage door exit, Bridget passed by Oliver's dressing room just as Oliver and Kitty emerged. With an air of strained gaiety about her, Kitty straightened her father's tie.

'You look absolutely smashing,' she said lovingly.

'I feel like a soggy tea bag. I'm not sure about all this.'

Coming out of Emma's dressing room, Jessica came on the two of them talking.

'It's been a while, you know,' Oliver continued. 'The machinery's a bit rusty.'

'Dad, you're going to be wonderful,' Kitty assured him.

Jessica interrupted. 'Hello.'

Oliver turned towards her, smiling gallantly.

'Mrs Fletcher, we wondered where you'd popped off to.'

'Oh, I was just poking around,' she explained, looking more than a little befuddled, and added with a tourist's enthusiasm: 'What a fascinating old place. I wonder, would you two have a few minutes? There's so much I'd like to catch up on. . . .'

Kitty was positively inured to Jessica's daffy charm, and replied icily. 'I'm sorry, Mrs Fletcher, but Dad has an appointment and . . .'

'Kitty,' Oliver said reprovingly.

But Kitty would have her way. 'Dad, we're late already.'

'Give me a moment,' Oliver pleaded.

Plainly unhappy about her father's insistence on speaking with Jessica, Kitty took up a position by the stage door.

Oliver was exceedingly apologetic. 'Forgive that snap in

her voice, Mrs Fletcher. Sometimes Kitty's like a faithful old watchdog – very loving and very protective.'

'It's obvious she adores you.' Jessica smiled, casting a glance in Kitty's direction, and thought to herself that the daughter may have adored her father, but she was none too keen about others taking up his time.

'Look here,' Oliver offered hesitantly, 'if I've seemed a bit standoffish, I do apologise. It's just that, the resemblance to Emma is so remarkable that I,' he stopped, on the brink of tears. 'Sorry, I'm making a bit of a fool of myself. Kitty's right. After fifteen years, it's time I got on with my life.'

Jessica wondered what he meant by that, but the explanation never came.

'Dad,' Kitty called impatiently.

Perhaps Jessica would hear the rest of the story later.

Oliver dramatically took her hand – as if he were a knight in armour and she a queen – and kissed it. 'You will excuse me.'

Jessica graciously excused him; still, she couldn't help thinking what a few minutes of additional conversation might have disclosed.

Outside in the alley where Emma had nearly been run over only a few nights before, Oliver seemed agitated.

'You're nervous,' Kitty told him. 'Don't be.'

'Auditioning at my age. It's positively humiliating,' he said with an anxious laugh. Distracted, Oliver hailed a cab on the nearby street. The black cab pulled to the curb. Oliver hesitated.

'Look, darlin',' he said to Kitty, 'would you mind very much if I went to this director's office by myself?'

'Are you sure? I don't mind, really . . .'

'Of course you don't.'

'All right,' she conceded. 'Look, I thought I'd check out some travel agents. Next weekend you and I should get away – maybe a little inn near Brighton.'

'Sounds like marvellous fun.'

'Call you this evening.'

With that, they embraced and Kitty kissed her father on the cheek. Oliver slid into the cab and closed the door. As it pulled away, Kitty watched the taxi disappear from view, then hailed a cab of her own, her worries fixed on her father all the while.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In the elegant district of Knightsbridge-Belgravia – just off Brompton Road near the internationally renowned Harrod's department store – was a small restaurant tucked away on a quiet street. Whenever Jessica visited London, she made a point of paying the quaint haven of Victoriana a visit. Like most things Victorian, it was slightly overdone, but tastefully so, and it offered more privacy than most of the more fashionable London restaurants. Besides, it served some of the finest oysters and flatfish to be found anywhere.

Jessica and Inspector Crimmins had requested of the patron that they enjoy their dinner at a corner table – a request which he had courteously obliged. With similar attentiveness to the pair, he brought a phone to their table when the Inspector received a call. Jessica was curious as Crimmins finished the conversation.

'Yes, well, call me if you hear anything,' he concluded, and hung up the phone. Somewhat automatically, he reached for the wine bottle on the table and began pouring Jessica another glass, an action which she thwarted by extending her hand over the top of the crystal goblet.

'No, no more for me, thanks.' One must have a clear head when murder is afoot, she thought to herself, though Crimmins apparently didn't feel the same way, pouring himself another full glass as he did.

Perhaps Crimmins was too nonchalant in his approach. But then, who was Jessica to judge; nonetheless, she was quite concerned about something and – fine food and spirits

or not – she couldn't refrain from speaking her concern directly.

'Inspector, you don't suppose whoever's behind this suspects what we're up to.'

'I shouldn't think so,' Inspector Crimmins said, throwing back another swallow of wine. 'Our would-be killer thinks Emma Macgill really *did* have that fatal accident. His or her guard should be down.'

That was little comfort to Jessica.

'But not Emma's, I hope,' she voiced her concern. 'I worry about her being alone in that Streatham hideout.'

'She's perfectly safe. Fielding's with her.'

Hardly appearing to hear the inspector, Jessica hatched an idea. 'You know, maybe we ought to take a look around her Chelsea Road flat. We might find something there – perhaps a clue or a lead.'

Vaguely intrigued, Crimmins set down his glass. 'What sort of clue?' he asked.

Jessica smiled and shrugged her shoulders. 'I haven't the vaguest idea.'

Her lack of a definite point didn't seem to bother him. 'Well, I suppose there'd be no harm.' Then, as if a notion had occurred to him, he picked up the phone and dialled. 'But we'd better get her permission to search the premises,' he told Jessica. 'Don't suppose you've got a key?'

'Sorry.'

'I really don't much feel like breaking any doors.'

The number was ringing. He handed the receiver to Jessica.

'Here, this is *your* idea, Mrs Fletcher – and *your* cousin.'

The phone rang loudly in Emma's flat. Ernest Fielding intercepted it before the noise awakened Emma, who was sound asleep in the nearby bedroom.

'Yes?' Fielding answered.

'Mr Fielding, it's Jessica Fletcher. May I speak to Emma, please?'

'Sorry, she's asleep, I'm afraid,' he informed her. 'Totally exhausted.'

Jessica's tone was firm and official. 'The Inspector and I want to take a look around her flat.'

Though Jessica had anticipated possible resistance to her snooping about the premises, she miscalculated. Fielding didn't hesitate to accommodate her and the Inspector.

'I can't see any harm in it,' he told her. 'She keeps a spare key on the ledge above the doorway. Just put it back when you leave.' Then a characteristic note of caution crept into his voice. 'And Mrs Fletcher, you *will* let me know if you learn anything.'

Shortly thereafter, Crimmins and Jessica were in the Inspector's black police sedan and moving through London to the dark, misty streets off the Chelsea Road. Lights were burning in the simple, expensive homes, but there were otherwise few signs of life on the dark streets. Inspector Crimmins slowed the car as he and Jessica scanned the rows of flats for one that struck them as familiar.

'That's it,' exclaimed Crimmins, indicating Emma's flat. But the address wasn't the only thing he noticed. 'Hello . . . ?'

The Inspector's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and Jessica turned to see whatever he was reacting to. Through the windshield of the car, they could both make out a woman, and a not unfamiliar woman at that. If they didn't know better they'd say it was . . . no, it couldn't be . . . not Emma. She was in the Streatham flat. Unless Fielding had lied.

Something funny here. Yes, the woman was wearing the distinctive leopard coat and a hat, and she hurried down the front stoop as if she'd done it a thousand times before.

Jessica and Crimmins exchanged puzzled glances.

Suddenly, their attention was diverted to the source of a loud noise coming from the opposite direction – the sound of a car gunning its engine and lurching forward around a corner. Jessica and Crimmins's eyes widened in horror. The car, which narrowly missed scraping a parked car as it righted itself, was deliberately speeding up and bearing down on the woman in the leopard coat.

In another minute it would hit her.

Too late to change her course, the woman bounded from the curb into the street. The noise startled her. She caught the approaching headlight out of the corner of her eye, then turned and was blinded by the brightness rushing towards her. As if she could prevent the collision by warding off the bright lights – or perhaps thinking an arm might offer some defense – the woman threw her arm up, obscuring her face.

There was a scream.

Crimmins leapt from his car.

The scream continued, piercing the night air. Then a thud.

'Good Lord!' Crimmins shouted in dismay. The black, foreign car had shifted course, and now it was veering towards him. His reflexes reacting instantly to the oncoming danger, Crimmins jumped out of the way and narrowly avoided being struck.

Stunned, Jessica watched as the speeding car fishtailed, its tyres squealing on the damp pavement, then roared off down the road to vanish into the distance. Despite her attempt to read the license plates, Jessica could make out nothing under the mud which obscured the numbers and made them undecipherable. Her principal concern at the moment was Crimmins.

'Inspector,' she shouted with alarm as she moved towards him. Her concern was alleviated somewhat as Crimmins rose to his feet and rushed, along with Jessica, to the fallen woman, who lay motionless on the road.

The quiet street was jarred to life. A couple coming home from dinner stopped their car just short of the accident and curiously moved in to learn what had happened. They were joined by their other neighbours who began emerging from their houses.

'What happened?' one inquired.

'I don't know,' an older gentleman said, shaking his head.

'Who is she?' one resident asked another, who replied, 'Don't know. Can't see.'

Apprehensively approaching the prostrate accident victim, Crimmins and Jessica leaned in, holding their breath. Jessica prayed it wasn't Emma. Gently, Crimmins reached down and turned the woman over, staring into her battered face.

It was Emma's coat all right, but the face belonged to none other than Emma's dresser, Bridget O'Hara.

'Bridget O'Hara,' Jessica pronounced with a sharp intake of breath.

So Bridget had got the leopard coat after all. Little did she know it had cost her her life.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Twenty minutes after the fatal collision, the usually tranquill Chelsea lane was transformed into a carnival-like atmosphere. Several London Bobbies cordoned off traffic at the scene with wooden barricades. The red swirling lights atop the police cars made kaleidoscopic patterns against the fronts of houses and trees. Despite the efforts of the earnest Bobbies to discourage them, onlookers gathered along the sidewalk, in the doorways, and on their steps to get a glimpse of the activity.

Crimmins stood beside the covered body. A Yard man of lesser rank took down details on a note pad as Crimmins gave an account of the accident. Jessica, only a few feet away, thoughtfully stared down at the body and was beginning to draw her own hypothesis about the presumed murder.

Crimmins's Scotland Yard colleague hardly so much as glimpsed up from his book as the inspector ticked off the details of the case.

'Her name's Bridget O'Hara,' Crimmins went on. 'She worked as a dresser at the Mayhew Music Hall. The car that struck her was a small sedan – dark coloured. . . .'

Just then another policeman interrupted him.

'Excuse me, Inspector,' the sergeant apologised. 'we've got a Mr Fielding on the line.'

'Yes, carry on,' said Crimmins, then motioned towards Jessica. 'Jessica,' he said, indicating for her to follow him.

Crimmins took the call in a nearby phone booth where the officer had left the phone resting on the shelf.

Jessica listened intently to his conversation. 'Mr Fielding, Inspector Crimmins here. I'm afraid I have some bad news.'

Indeed, back at the Streatham flat, the news affected Fielding much more drastically than anyone would have thought the unemotional solicitor capable of. An expression of shock and concern overcame his usually stoic countenance.

'Yes, yes, I see,' he stammered out of character. 'Poor woman, what on Earth . . . ?'

From the adjacent bedroom, Emma overheard the distressed tone of her solicitor's voice. She hovered anxiously by as he hung up the phone.

He lowered his voice to strike the appropriate note of sympathy. 'It's Bridget,' he told her. 'An accident in front of your flat.'

'Is she . . . ?'

Crimmins nodded his head, and Emma slumped into an armchair.

'Inspector Crimmins thinks they mistook her for you.'

All Emma could do was hold her head in her hands as a wave of guilt came over her. There but for the grace of God went she. She heard Ernest Fielding tell her that Inspector Crimmins would like her to make an appearance at the Yard, if it wasn't too much trouble. Routine questioning, and all that. It sounded harmless enough at first. But the more she thought about poor Bridget, the more terrifying the prospect became.

In the meantime, at the murder scene in Chelsea, an ambulance arrived, two attendants lifted the body onto a stretcher, and slid the gurney into the rear of the wagon. The Inspector, occupied with organising the investigation into the murder of Bridget O'Hara, conferred with a group of his men, then dismissed them. They would reconvene at the Yard.

Exhausted from the tiring events of the day, Jessica felt little relief when Crimmins informed her that he'd be taking her back to Scotland Yard with him. Perhaps she could be of further assistance there. At least she could be of some

comfort to Emma. Jessica smiled. She had no objection; in fact, she was quite certain that somehow she would come up with something – it was only a matter of time.

The lights of New Scotland Yard were burning bright. Crimmins took leave of Jessica, disappearing into his office. She took a seat outside in the public hall. Phones rang. Policemen scurried here and there, responding to calls. There must never be a moment's peace in this place, Jessica thought to herself. On the brink of nodding off only a few moments before, Jessica found herself intrigued with the blur of activity and quite alert for the hour.

At first she didn't recognise the man coming towards her, then it became clear that he knew her as he exclaimed, 'Mrs Fletcher.' She looked up. 'Oh, Mr Weems,' she greeted him, indicating he take a seat beside her. She wondered what in the world he was doing here and hoped he might be forthcoming with some clue.

'Bridget,' he said, shaking his head. 'I can't believe it. Run down in the street. And deliberate, too.'

'I'm afraid it was,' she sadly confirmed.

Reluctant to sit down, Archie overcame his awkwardness and made himself comfortable on a chair next to hers.

'Look here,' he whispered, expecting to draw Jessica out a bit. 'Tell me straight. I hear Emma's okay. That there never was no accident.'

This was a jarring revelation to Jessica, who thought Emma's condition was a carefully guarded state secret. She did her best to feign surprise. 'And who told you that?'

'Sergeant chum of mine. Tells me just now, when he sees me come in.'

Jessica sighed. The word was out; Emma was in danger again. 'It's true. Emma is alive,' she admitted.

'Bloody hell, what's going on?' Archie asked.

'Mr Weems, the coat Bridget was wearing,' she began, looking him so squarely in the eye, awaiting his reaction, so that he dare not lie to her – or, if he did, she would quickly discern it. 'In the lining were the initials E.M.

Bridget was leaving Emma's flat wearing Emma's coat. In the darkness the killer probably assumed it was Emma.'

'That'd be a bit queer,' he jumped in without so much as batting an eyelash, 'Considerin' we all thought Emma was dead.'

'Good point, Mr Weems,' she congratulated him on his astuteness, liar or not. 'There's something else odd. Why would Bridget be wearing Emma's coat?'

Archie gave this a good think. 'I wouldn't know,' he said, puzzled, 'unless. . . .' Jessica leaned forward, waiting. 'Was it by chance Emma's *leopard* coat?'

'Yes, it was.'

Archie clapped his hands and broke out into a self-satisfied grin. 'Sure, I get it. Emma promised that coat to Bridget. No secret about it. Maybe Bridget decided to grab it before the lawyers started muckin' things up.'

As he proposed his theory – which seemed too neatly developed to Jessica – Archie failed to take note of Inspector Crimmins, who had quietly sneaked up on him.

'A very reasonable explanation, Mr Weems,' Crimmins commented dryly. Weems pulled himself up into a rigid posture as he and Jessica turned towards the Inspector. 'And may I ask what you're doing here?'

'No secret,' Archie Weems smiled one of his oily smiles. 'Pal o' mine on the *Standard* told me about Bridget. I also got tipped you've got Emma stashed away healthy as you please.'

Crimmins was anything but pleased by Weems's smugness. 'I'd keep that information to yourself,' he admonished him. 'Come on, Jessica. We're paying a visit.'

Appearing not to get the point, Weems sprang to his feet. 'On Emma? Mind if I tag along? Like to see how the old girl's doin'.'

That was about all Crimmins could tolerate from the nettlesome Mr Weems. Fortunately, a sergeant happened to pass by just in time for Crimmins to grab him by the arm.

'Excuse me, Barbury,' he said, pointing to Weems, 'This

gentleman has a statement to make in the O'Hara accident. Take it all down, will you? Shouldn't take more than a half hour.' Then he winked to let the sergeant know it was a ruse to keep the man detained.

'Right, sir,' the sergeant responded in all earnestness, and moved to lead Weems into an interrogation room.

As Jessica and Crimmins left the Yard waiting room, they heard Archie Weems protesting:

'Here, now. You can't do this.'

Sergeant Barbury was unmoved by his pleas, and took the protesting Weems by the arm to lead him in the opposite direction.

Crimmins was still chuckling about Weems's predicament while he and Jessica waited for the elevator. But Jessica had other questions on her mind.

'What happened?' she asked. 'I thought Emma was coming *here*.'

'Fielding called,' he informed her. 'He says she's terrified to leave the flat.'

Still in her Streatham flat, Emma had calmed down some since first feeling debilitated by the news of Bridget's tragic demise. Having Jessica by her side was no small comfort. Even Crimmins made her feel more at ease; at least he gave her the sense that something was being done to unravel this frightening business.

Asked about the leopard coat, Emma replied to Crimmins, 'I *did* promise that coat to Bridget. But why did she feel she had to take it?'

Fielding had a ready answer:

'My fault, I suppose. She'd asked me about it several times. Since I was evasive, she must have thought she'd been forgotten in the will.'

Then Crimmins put in, stating what they all already had by now surmised:

'And so the killer – seeing her hurry down the steps – wearing the leopard coat – assumed Bridget was Emma

and. . . .' There was no need to elaborate on the consequences of Bridget's ill-advised move. Crimmins shrugged.

Jessica was not willing to let the matter rest there. 'The question is, Inspector,' she said, 'why make that assumption? Everyone believed Emma to be dead. The killer must have known Emma was still alive.'

'Archie knew,' Crimmins stated.

'But not until he walked into the station,' Jessica remarked. 'Or so he said.' It would be easy enough to check with the sergeants there.

There was a long silence. Jessica glanced over at Fielding, who became agitated and flushed.

'You're not suggesting that *I* was indiscreet,' he said, taking great umbrage at the mere suggestion.

Jessica directed her gaze at Emma, who held her look momentarily before turning away.

'Security was breached by someone,' Jessica said matter-of-factly and without making any judgments. She wondered if it could have been her own cousin. 'Emma?' she inquired.

Fidgeting, Emma finally confessed:

'Oh, Jessica, I feel like such a fool.'

'Then you *did* talk to someone.' Jessica felt as if they were getting somewhere at last. So much of solving a puzzle was in asking the right questions of the right people.

'No, not directly.' Once again, Jessica appeared baffled by her cousin's wavering. 'I – I was worried about Oliver, especially after Ernest told me how poorly he was holding up. I – uh – called his flat and left a message on his answering machine.'

Unable to disguise his disgust, Crimmins sighed loudly. 'Bloody marvellous.'

Now it was Emma's turn to be furious. 'Oliver would not harm me!' she insisted.

That was not what the Inspector had been inferring. 'But he might have dropped a careless word to someone else and before you know it, all of London's in on our little secret.' Somewhat ashamed of herself, Emma lowered her head. 'Did you also tell him this address?'

'Of course not,' she shot back, angry that the Inspector would take her for such a fool.

'Thank God for that,' said Crimmins, relieved.

Crimmins was growing increasingly agitated. Fielding, thinking his reputation somehow impuned, seemed to have retired to a corner of the room to sulk. Jessica had the distinct impression they were making scant progress.

'Inspector, aren't we getting a little ahead of ourselves?' Jessica asked. 'We're not even sure Oliver heard the message.'

'What's his address?' Crimmins demanded.

Emma murmured, 'Eighty-four Cumberland Mews, rear.'

Crimmins, who had heard quite enough, turned on his heel and headed for the door. Jessica gave her cousin a hasty hug as the Inspector stepped outside, adding:

'I'll also be posting a twenty-four-hour surveillance outside this building.'

Solicitor Fielding found his voice again. 'Is that necessary?'

'It is. Not only for Miss Macgill's protection, but on the odd chance our killer makes another attempt, we will be waiting for him.'

His ominous-sounding words of warning delivered, Crimmins slipped outside, Jessica following directly on his heels.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The house was dark at the Mayhew Music Hall.

But back in the business office, Violet burned the midnight oil. A fine night of it she was having, too – being left alone to entertain Mr Danny Briggs. *Impressario. Ignoramus* was more like it. A man like that, she thought, ought to be doing more than pacing back and forth, driving her batty with his nervousness. Violet had taken great pains to be very attractive to Mr Briggs. Pity, he'd hardly seemed to notice the makeup or the low-cut dress she'd selected on his account.

The time was the only thing that seemed to interest him. It was getting late, a sad fact which Danny Briggs reminded her of every time he looked impatiently at his watch. She couldn't go on pretending to read these bloody account books all night.

'Archie'll be here,' she assured him, struggling to smile.

'Taking his own sweet time about it,' Briggs complained. 'If this is another stall . . .'

'I only know what he said,' Violet scowled, dropping any pretense of sweetness. "Ring up Danny Briggs," he says. "I've got news."' Then she remembered herself – and the money to be made. 'Maybe he's made an arrangement with the American cousin,' she suggested, cheerful-like.

'Funny, I got the feeling she wouldn't be an easy nut to crack.'

Violet assumed her posture of worldly-wise businesswoman. 'She's got no use for the place, and with a handsome profit to be made, she'll sell, all right.'

The last thing she'd counted on was Archie putting her in her place.

'Wouldn't count on that, love.' It was Archie, all right, overhearing everything from the hallway before he stepped into the office.

'She's alive,' he told the pair of them.

'Who?' Danny asked.

'*Emma*,' answered Archie Weems. 'Who'd you think I meant?'

Violet pushed herself away from the desk and stood up to confront her husband:

'That's crazy – Archie!'

'She's hiding out,' he said, refusing to let her interrupt him. 'The whole thing was a stunt. Seems someone's been trying to put her away.' He glanced pointedly at Danny Briggs.

'Not me,' Briggs denied.

'I said "someone", Briggs. I named no names, but I warn you – I draw the line at murder.'

Dropping his ersatz polish, Danny placed his large, menacing frame in front of Weems.

'So do I, Archie. But I'm goin' to have that woman's signature on a contract. My partners can be very unpleasant gentlemen – even violent – and if someone's going to get hurt, it won't be me.'

Even Violet, resident Lady Macbeth that she was, could not wipe the dread from her wringing hands.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Like Emma – and several others of the entertainment world who could afford it – Oliver Trumbull made his home in Chelsea. While his flat was some distance downriver from Emma's, on occasion he and Emma would meet halfway between them in the Raneleagh Gardens by the Royal Hospital for a stroll along the Chelsea Embankment. Near Sloane Square's park, Oliver's street was much as it always had been, the quiet, tree-lined lane having survived the onslaught of the chic boutiques for which Chelsea became known in the late 60's. Perhaps most cherished by Oliver was the neighbourhood's local theatre, the Royal Court, where he thrilled to many an exciting drama.

Oliver's landlady, a wiry, gossipy Cockney sort who could have easily been an ageing character actress herself, did not take kindly to Inspector Crimmins's request that she let him and the American lady into the flat. Jessica quickly sized her up as a suspicious woman whose hands fluttered about uncontrollably, adding nervousness to her untrusting nature.

But after some coaxing by the Inspector, and after realising that the American woman was one of those VIPs (she wasn't certain which one, though the face was as familiar as a tabloid photo), she let them into Oliver's flat with her passkey.

The flat was dark. No sooner had the landlady turned on the lights than Jessica and the Inspector set to making themselves at home, checking out everything without

saying so much as a word. The landlady succumbed to her compulsive need to talk:

'Fact is,' she babbled on, 'I haven't seen Mr Trumbull. Last I saw 'im, he was off to services at the *theatre* of all places. Some people got no sense of propriety.' Her huffiness let them know her indignant attitude on the subject, and put them on alert that they were dealing with a respectful member of the Church of England.

'And you say he hasn't returned since?' Crimmins inquired, leafing through an address book.

'Said I didn't hear him,' the landlady set him straight. "Course I been back in the kitchen a lot, watchin' the telly. Manys a tenant comes and goes without me knowin'. He hasn't done anything wrong, has he, Sergeant? I do so like the old gentleman.'

'It's *Inspector*,' Crimmins corrected her, 'and we'll let ourselves out.' His firm tone contained more than a hint that she was to leave them alone.

'No need to get testy, sir,' she whined, her pride hurt. 'I can take a hint.'

After the landlady had gone and closed the door behind her, Crimmins joined Jessica by the long rows of bookshelves. She was examining the leather-bound volumes and collections of dramatic works with a keen eye. Among the many treasures were souvenirs from Oliver's youth: photos, playbills, letters, awards. Many of the programme covers pictured Oliver in Shakespearean roles; truly, a surprising discovery to Jessica and Crimmins alike.

'Take a look, Inspector,' said Jessica. 'Southgate Theatre. Nearly twenty years ago. Oliver Trumbull playing King Lear.'

'Trumbull? A Shakespearean actor? Hardly seems possible.' Though the Inspector was amazed, the revelation seemed to be of little significance. His eye caught the answering device on an antique stand. 'Let's take a listen to that.'

The Inspector looked the machine over and, locating the

appropriate buttons, set the tape in motion. First there was static on the tape, then a man's voice:

'Trumbull. Ned Wiley here. Sorry that I missed you at the office. About the audition tomorrow, we're pretty much cast but if you want to pop into the lobby of the Cumberland tonight around nine, I'll have a look at you. No promises, of course. Up to you.'

Jessica and Crimmins listened intently. They heard nothing more.

'Emma's call must be earlier,' Jessica suggested.

Rewinding the tape partially, Crimmins punched the 'forward' button again.

'Oliver, it's me, love,' came the sound of Emma's voice over the speaker. 'I heard about how upset you were this morning and I'm dreadfully sorry to put you through this. I'm safe and well and that's all I can say for now. Please don't tell anyone you've heard from me or I'll be in terrible danger.'

The message was followed by a click as it ended. Crimmins shut off the machine. Exchanging looks, Jessica and the Inspector each thought the same thing: Oliver Trumbull had returned in time to receive the message, and would have easily had time to drive across Chelsea to run down the woman he believed to be Emma Macgill.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Hingham Theatre was situated near the end of Charing Cross Road where it approached the Strand. Built about the turn of the Century, the theatre, a small house, usually housed classical dramas.

It was still morning, soon after Jessica and Crimmins had finished inspecting Oliver's flat. Oliver was on stage at the Hingham, auditioning for the upcoming production of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One*. Outside the entrance to the theatre, a custodian was inserting the placard, announcing the play's opening in six weeks. Inside the nearly empty auditorium, Oliver's voice haltingly rose and fell. His delivery was obviously unsure.

'Go thy ways, old Jack; die when thy wilt,' he read, struggling just to make out Falstaff's words in the dim light.

The play book trembled in his hand. Pausing, he fumbled with his glasses in a vain attempt to improve his reading. The harder it was to discern the print, the more nervous Oliver became. For his daughter Kitty, standing off to the side watching, it was a painful reminder of how much her father's stature in the theatre had declined. She wished she did not have to see him like this. The experience was made all the more painful by the director, an impatient and imperious little tyrant who wore a leather jacket and khaki balloon pants with a chain belt around them. This pesky Napoleon's thin hair appeared to be falling out by the minute. Straddled across a chair in front of the stage, he listened with annoyance to Oliver and nervously ran his

hand across the top of head. The director's younger, sycophantic assistant bit his lower lip and cringed in embarrassment. The casting director, a sensibly dressed, middle-aged woman, slumped into her seat, her hands covering her eyes.

All the same, Oliver, trouper that he was, continued with the speech:

' . . . if manhood, good manhood, be not – uh – be not forgot upon the face of the earth, then I am a – a . . .'

Apologetically, he lowered the book and spoke to the seats. 'Excuse me.' Picking up again, he went on, 'Be not forgot upon the face of the earth, then I am a shotten herring. There live not three good men unhanged in England and one of them is fat and grows old.'

The director had obviously heard his fill of this monologue. 'Yes, yes, thank you, Mr Trumbull,' he said, waving him off stage. Agitated, he jumped from his seat and bounded up the side stairs to the stage.

'I haven't finished,' Oliver reminded him.

'I've heard quite enough, thanks,' the director snapped through his teeth.

Precisely at the tail end of their charged exchange, Jessica entered the darkened rear of the theatre. She observed the proceedings with great interest as Oliver's voice found renewed strength:

'Young man, you gave me the courtesy of an audition. Have the manners to hear me out.'

'Look, old timer, courtesy had nothing to do with it,' the director snarled testily. 'You accost me in my hotel lobby. You plead for a tryout. Well, you got one, and, frankly you won't do.'

With a patronising gesture, the director put his hand on Oliver's shoulder.

'Some years ago I'm sure you would have made an acceptable Falstaff, but . . .'

Oliver didn't allow him to finish; instead, he slapped his arm away. The old actor's eyes had the fury of Lear in them as they shot streams of fire at the pretentious director.

'Acceptable?' Oliver shouted, launching into a classical

tirade. 'Doth my Lord comfort me? Came he right now to sing a raven's note whose dismal tune bereft my vital powers? And thinks he that the chirping of a wren by crying comfort from a hollow breast can chase away the first conceived sound? Hide not thy poison with such sugared words. Lay not they hands on me. Forbear, I say – their touch affrights me as a serpent's sting!'

His explosive speech delivered, and having found its mark in the mind of the petty director, Oliver spun on his heel and departed like a lion who had roared, terrorised his prey, and spared it. The director was open-mouthed. Kitty was nearly speechless as well as she chased after her father, uttering a meak, 'Dad,' out of concern for his welfare.

Oliver marched down the centre aisle of the theatre, Kitty trailing behind. In the back seats, he saw Jessica. Surprised, and somewhat embarrassed, he curtailed his anger.

'Mrs Fletcher, forgive me,' he told her. 'I am distressed you were witness to that embarrassment.'

Jessica smiled graciously and rose. 'The embarrassment was not yours, Mr Trumbull, believe me.'

'You were magnificent,' said Kitty.

'Humph,' Oliver scoffed mightily. 'Magnificent and unemployed.'

'Is there somewhere we can talk?' Jessica asked him.

Oliver had such a place, and he warmed to the idea, brightening. 'It happens I know a friendly pub just around the corner.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

'Emma . . . *alive*?'

'Very much so,' Jessica assured Oliver with all solemnity as she watched him lower his large mug of ale.

The blood seemed to have drained from his face, and his hands trembled. No one else in the pub took notice. It was the tavern's quietest hour, being mid-morning, and most of the crowd appeared to be regulars, older and retired, or younger and unemployed, hoping to set aside their troubles over some ale. Jessica had taken care to find an inconspicuous table, tucked away in a corner. The place was as good as any for Oliver to hear the news. Typically English with dark wood, mugs hanging about over the bar, and a dart board in the rear, the pub offered a warmer atmosphere than most. Yellow sunlight poured in through the amber leaded glass windows.

Only Kitty seemed intent on disturbing the tranquil mood. She delivered her view of the matter with vehemence:

'Mrs Fletcher, is this some sort of joke?' she demanded. 'That Inspector said her body had been washed up on a beach near Portsmouth.'

Trying to quell Kitty's emotions, Jessica anticipated her inquiries and jumped in with a ready explanation:

'Inspector Crimmins was helping us,' she explained to Kitty. Then she directed her next revelation to both of them. 'Emma's in hiding – under police protection. Over the past several weeks, attempts have been made on her life.'

Recalling the incident after their performance, Oliver snapped his fingers.

'That car in the alley!' he said. 'I *knew* that was no accident. Jessica, I must see her immediately.'

'No,' said Jessica quietly, shaking her head. 'I'm sorry.'

Oliver's temper flared. 'The hell you say.'

And Kitty reached over to appease him. 'Dad . . . !'

'Stay out of this, Kitty,' he barked. The face that was blanched only a moment before was bright red, like a melon about to burst. 'Forgive me, madame,' he said quite deliberately to Jessica, 'but you sit me down. First you tell me Bridget O'Hara was killed last night – and as if that weren't enough, you suddenly reincarnate dear Emma from a watery grave.' His fists were tightly clenched, wanting to strike out at something. 'I call that bloody unfeeling of you.'

Kitty's voice was firm and direct, that of a schoolteacher scolding a child. 'Dad, calm down.'

Sympathetically, Jessica folded her hands before her on the table and looked into Oliver's eyes. Not so very long ago, she had been subjected to the same anguish herself. 'Mr Trumbull, I'm sorry. But I'm very surprised you didn't know Emma was alive. After all, she phoned you late yesterday.'

'What?' said Oliver, genuinely puzzled.

'The message was on your answering machine,' Jessica explained.

'I never heard it,' he told her. 'I never went home.'

'Oh?' said Jessica flatly, not betraying much surprise, even though this certainly shed a new light on things.

Jessica leaned forward and listened curiously while Oliver accounted for himself the previous day.

'I spent the afternoon cooling my heels in the office of that fool director,' he said. 'When I didn't get to see him, I camped out in the hotel lobby. I finally managed to collar him, practically begged for an audition.' Yes, Jessica recalled hearing the director refer to that. 'The youngster did not remember my Romeo at the Globe.' When Jessica's

face registered no surprise at this fact, Oliver cleared his throat. 'Admittedly, that was some years ago . . .'

'I found him in the lounge around 12:30,' put in Kitty, eager to support her father's story. 'Half awake,' she added with melancholy, 'a room key dangling from his pocket.'

Oliver shrugged sheepishly. 'Only way I could get a drink past 11:00, you know,' he confessed. 'Had to check in.'

'So I put him to bed for the rest of the night,' Kitty told Jessica.

'I see,' Jessica said, nodding to Oliver. The pieces of the puzzle – people, places, times central to the events of the day, leading up to the murder – were beginning to fall into place. But there was something else she needed to clarify. 'You went directly from the director's office to the lobby and then to the lounge and then to bed.' She posed her question very slowly, carefully articulating it. The answer was crucial.

'Dull but true,' Oliver sighed and took another swallow of his ale.

Jessica stared him straight in the eyes, expecting to catch him in a lie. But his gaze was unwavering, and he didn't seem deceptive in the least. Perhaps this was his best performance.

'I'm sorry, Oliver,' Jessica said, shaking her head, 'but I heard the taped message from that director asking you to meet him at the hotel. On the same tape was Emma's message that she was alive and well.' She paused, anticipating his reaction. When none came, she went on: 'You couldn't hear one without the other.'

That's when Crimmins found them at their table.

'My thoughts precisely,' he pronounced authoritatively.

When the others looked up, they found the Scotland Yard inspector was not alone. A uniformed Bobby was at his side.

Crimmins stepped forward, towering over the bewildered old actor.

'Oliver Trumbull,' he announced in a booming voice that

attracted the attention of the pub's other patrons, 'I am placing you under arrest . . .'

'No!' protested Kitty.

Crimmins continued, ' . . . for the murder of Bridget O'Hara,' then motioned to the policeman. 'Officer.'

The officer motioned for Oliver to rise, took him firmly by the arm, and pulled him to his feet.

Kitty was paralysed by her disbelief.

Jessica exchanged glances with Oliver, then Crimmins.

This was a twist of fate which even she had failed to foresee and – to her way of thinking – much too premature. But it was painfully clear that for Inspector Crimmins the jury was no longer out.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When they drove Oliver Trumbull along the expansive boulevard on the perimeter of St. James' Park, then past Westminster Abbey to Victoria Street and the headquarters of New Scotland Yard, the actor felt as though he were playing the part of a condemned man. His face forlorn, he stared vacantly out the window of Inspector Crimmins' car.

But once he had been led through the corridors of the Yard and mingled with more vocal, wretched souls brought in under arrest, Oliver could feel his righteous anger beginning to rise.

Admirably, he thought, he managed to hold his tongue in Inspector Crimmins's office; albeit, impatiently, as he sat in an uncomfortable chair facing the desk. Crimmins was not what one would call a polite host. His tone was accusatory, and his pacing made Oliver anxious. At Crimmins' invitation, solicitor Ernest Fielding was also in the room, a witness to the proceedings.

'Bridget O'Hara was struck by that car at 8:15,' Crimmins told Oliver Trumbull. 'The director suggested you meet him in the hotel lobby at 9:00 o'clock – a difference of forty-five minutes. Ample time for you to get from Chelsea Road to the Cumberland.'

'And I tell you, I did not hear that message,' Oliver insisted.

'Yes, you just *happened* to be at the hotel,' the Inspector said facetiously.

His tone firm, Oliver Trumbull was growing increasingly annoyed. 'I overheard his secretary make a dinner reservation at the Cumberland dining room while I was in his office.' He glanced at Crimmins, but the new information appeared to have no marked effect. 'I knew if I waited in the lobby, he would eventually show up. I was there from 7:30 until nearly 11:00, a fact which can be verified by both the porter and the concierge. In fact, Inspector, I was paged for a phone call from my daughter.'

This came as no startling news to Crimmins, who had already checked at the hotel.

'They remember the call, Mr Trumbull,' Crimmins told him, 'and they remember you – but they can't verify the *time* you were there.'

Lost, and feeling his last defense gone, Oliver sighed heavily.

Outside in the waiting area, Jessica sat with Kitty, whose face had been softened by the anxiety which possessed her. Jessica gave her a comforting pat on the shoulder and forced a cheerful smile.

'This is a ghastly joke,' Kitty told her. 'Oliver *loved* Emma. He'd never try to hurt her.'

Jessica noticed how pale her face had become. Perhaps it was merely the makeup smudged off by the tears. 'I wish I could believe that,' Jessica responded.

'You would if you knew him,' said Kitty, hoping to find an ally in Jessica. 'Do you know how hard this is for me? A *schoolteacher*? I've spent the past three years trying to instill in my students a respect for authority. And what do I tell them *now*, Mrs Fletcher?'

Jessica had no answer for that. She knew that neither she nor the authorities had cornered any market on arriving at the truth.

Just then Crimmins, accompanied by Ernest Fielding, approached. Kitty looked up worriedly at the solicitor. His grave expression gave no cause to be optimistic. Her father had already been taken away.

'I'm sorry, Kitty,' Fielding told her. 'Your father will be formally charged tomorrow morning.'

Kitty leapt to her feet and challenged Crimmins. 'No!

He was at the hotel! I *phoned* him there – at 8:00 o'clock. There's no way he could have been in two places at once.'

Jessica listened with keen interest as Crimmins went on to inform her, 'The concierge confirmed your call, Miss Trumbull, but at *9:00* o'clock, not 8:00.'

'He's *wrong!*' Kitty adamantly asserted.

Fielding stepped in between Kitty and Crimmins while Jessica continued to look on.

'Kitty, lying is not going to help this situation,' he said, appealing to her to tell the truth and let the judicial system decide the verdict. 'I have an appointment in an hour with a very capable barrister. Believe me, your father will receive the best defence possible.'

Hesitant, Kitty acceded to his suggestion, then turned to Crimmins and inquired:

'May I see him?'

Crimmins compromised and nodded his assent.

'I'll talk to the sergeant,' said Ernest Fielding. Then taking Kitty by the arm, he led her away to see her father. Remaining behind in the waiting area, Jessica watched them go. Seemingly preoccupied, she was incorporating the latest developments into her own scheme of the mystery. Perhaps Emma could clear some things up.

'Inspector, I'd like to talk to Emma,' she asked.

'Yes,' he agreed, 'that might be a very good idea.'

In Streatham, across the street from Emma's flat, a plainclothes policeman lounged conspicuously on a bench by a small park. A group of children played loudly in the playground behind him. He hardly seemed to notice the din. His gaze was fixed on a copy of the *Times*, though his eyes constantly flicked towards the doorway of Emma's hideaway.

Two cars came up the street – nothing out of the ordinary – until one of the cars, a new European Ford, stopped suddenly; the car following closely behind, a rusty Triumph, plowed into its rear. At the sound of the crunch of metal, the plainclothes policeman dropped his paper.

The doors of the Triumph flew open and two men, tough

punkers, both of them, jumped out of the car. Angrily, the man behind the wheel of the Ford got out the right side of his vehicle and proceeded to confront the two young men, whose red and purple Mohawk hair and dangling jewelry seemed to give him pause.

The curious plainclothesman had no way of knowing that the man in the Ford – Archie Weems – had an interest in Emma Macgill and her Streatham flat. Nor did he suspect that the wreck might be a ruse to divert his attention from his duties.

'Here, what's the matter with you?' the punker demanded of Archie Weems as he stepped towards him.

'Are you blind, mate?' Archie asked. 'Whatcha mean, rammin' into me?'

'Aw, come off it. Where'd you learn to drive?'

The punker's angry friend joined the fray, shouting, 'He's bloody drunk, Alf. Look at him.' then he grabbed Archie by the lapels.

'Get your hands off me,' screamed Archie.

'Listen to him, Bert,' said Alf in a mocking tone.

From his perspective, the policeman could see that this confrontation was on the brink of erupting into fisticuffs. Better to step in now before something happened, even if this wasn't part of his assignment.

'Here, here. All right, boys,' he called to them. 'That's enough.'

The plainclothesman flashed them his credentials.

The tough released Archie, but didn't appear happy about the interference from the cop. 'Keep out of this.'

'You seen it,' Archie said to the plainclothesman. 'They slammed right into me, they did.'

Meanwhile, as the policeman was breaking up the fight – all of which had been staged for his benefit – Danny Briggs quickly slipped out of a nearby doorway where he had been hiding. Unobserved by the policeman, Danny scurried inside the front door and made his way to Emma's flat. In one of his business suits – which gave him the

appearance of a gangster rather than that of an impressario – Danny Briggs pounded on the door.

Hearing the knock, Emma put down the magazine she was reading. 'Yes?' she asked. 'Who is it?'

Danny lowered his voice in an effort to disguise it. 'Constable Barnes, Miss Macgill.'

Emma didn't give it a second thought. It never occurred to her that she didn't know a Constable Barnes, and that the police usually called to inform her they were coming.

No sooner had she opened the door and spotted Danny Briggs than she realised, too late, the gravity of her mistake. She immediately shoved the door with all her strength, but she was no match for Danny's young muscles. He ducked inside, slamming the door behind him. Terrified, Emma felt her heart beating furiously and her pulse racing. She backed up towards the window.

'What do you want?' she asked him.

'Take it easy,' Danny replied. 'I don't want to hurt you.' Not in the least relieved, Emma wasn't convinced. 'I just want to talk,' he told her.

'We have nothing to talk about, Mr Briggs.'

Plainly, Danny Briggs could hurt her. His face flushed with anger as he stepped towards her threateningly. 'Oh, we do, lady. Plenty. Except talk's not all I've come for. Time for playin' games is over. I'm here to get your signature on this bill of sale.' He opened his jacket and tapped a sheet of paper in the inside pocket.

'No,' she said, summoning up her courage.

'Don't tell me *no!*' he said. His voice, panicked, was becoming shrieky. 'I've got people to answer to – people that'll peel away my hide if I don't deliver.' He smiled a sinister smile and lowered his voice to an ominous stage whisper. 'So you'll sign. Oh, you will sign, or I'll get the place from your cousin after you're dead and gone.'

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As Crimmins pulled towards the curb in front of Emma's flat, the Inspector paid little attention to the commotion in the street. Jessica, who was with him, heard the loud row.

'And who's going to pay for my bleedin' car?' shouted Archie Weems.

Getting out of the Inspector's car, Jessica faintly recognised his voice.

'Not me, mate,' Alf, the purple Mohawk, was replying. 'You need a seein' eye dog, you do.'

Without so much as observing his plainclothes officer, Thompson, in the midst of the altercation, Crimmins headed for the entrance to the building. Troubled, Jessica remained by the car and looked more closely at the men arguing. Then it came to her: the loudest of them was Archie Weems!

Weems couldn't help noticing her either. It only took the flash of his eyes towards Emma's flat for Jessica to deduce what was happening.

'Inspector!' she shouted, alarmed as Crimmins started inside.

Meanwhile, Archie Weems knew he was done for. Quickly appraising the situation, he dashed towards his car. The two thugs – his partners in the charade – followed suit.

Archie's car engine roared to life. His tyres squeeled, startling plainclothesman Thompson. Before Thompson or Crimmins could lift a finger, both cars had sped away, their gunned engines leaving behind a cloud of sooty exhaust in the street.

'Thompson!' Crimmins cried, finally seeing his plainclothesman standing by himself, bewildered, in the middle of the road. The bewildered officer suddenly came around and ran towards the doorway with Jessica.

The first to arrive at the door, Jessica knocked on it with all her might. 'Emma! Emma,' she called anxiously. 'It's Jessica.'

Inside the small sitting room, Emma's arm was caught in Danny Briggs's vicelike grip. Her face was in pain. Taken by surprise at the sound of Jessica's voice, Briggs panicked. In his sudden fear, he pushed Emma aside. She fell safely to the floor while he bolted towards the front window and looked outside.

Free from Briggs' clutches, Emma took advantage of the moment to scream at the top of her lungs. 'Jessica!'

Crimmins and Thompson pounded on the door.

'Miss Macgill!' Crimmins shouted.

Unable to escape through the front window, Briggs had no choice. It was either the rear of the flat, or be nabbed by the coppers. Accordingly, he made a dash through the sitting room, upsetting the telephone, a standing lamp, and a small table.

While struggling to budge the back window open, Danny Briggs didn't pay much mind to Emma's movements. He would have been wise to keep an eye on her, for without his paying heed, she snatched a heavy vase from the mantlepiece and lugged it towards Danny's head.

Danny Briggs hit the threadbare Persian rug like a sack of wet wheat. Emma smiled, dusted off her hands in self-satisfaction, and, entirely collected, moved to the door. Having heard her cry only moments before, Jessica, Crimmins, and Thompson were stunned to be greeted by her effusive grin.

'Emma?' Jessica said quizzically.

'I'm fine, Jessica,' she said, nodding towards Briggs in the rear. 'Can't say the same for him.'

Emma's would-be rescuers all turned towards the fallen

Briggs. Dazed, he was groggily trying to pull himself to his feet.

'Oh, well done, Miss Macgill,' Crimmins said as though it were nothing, then handed the matter over to Thompson: 'Take care of him,' he instructed, indicating Briggs.

The plainclothesman grabbed Danny Briggs from behind and lifted him to his feet. The ladies and Crimmins were glad to see him being escorted outside to the awaiting police vehicle.

Crimmins flashed a smile at the two women. 'A nice bit of work,' he complimented. Suddenly Jessica's face appeared clouded to Crimmins, lacking the elation he expected to see at the apprehension of the killer. His own face sagged as he anticipated some disappointment. 'Or perhaps not,' he added.

Emma also noticed her cousin's somber expression. 'What is it, Jessica?'

'Yes, we've got our man,' Crimmins said with false hope. 'You should be delighted.'

Jessica shook her head earnestly. 'Our man? No, Inspector. I'm sorry to say we don't.'

Emotionally spent and entirely puzzled, Emma Macgill and Inspector Crimmins had the same question on their minds:

If not Danny Briggs, then who?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ghosts were in the Mayhew Music Hall. Oliver Trumbull was certain of it.

Or perhaps it was just the paranoia of a freed man who feared being apprehended again and spirited off to jail. At any rate, the boards of the stage were creaking as Oliver and Jessica walked across them. Pausing centre stage, they heard other sounds. Rats? The noises of the theatre settling on its foundations? Wind in the rafters? The spectral work light overhead, the only light in the dark house, accentuated the ghostly atmosphere. Oliver whispered:

'Jessica, I'm not sure how you arranged my release, but I shall be eternally grateful.'

'Thank Inspector Crimmins,' Jessica told him. 'It was his decision.'

The two of them looked about the dark theatre, not knowing what, if anything, they would see.

Oliver released a remorseful sigh. 'Seventeen years I trod these boards,' he said, memories flashing before him. 'Oh, it was grand – especially back then – when they knew we were here. This old place would ring with laughter and music.'

Suddenly there came the sound of footsteps approaching from the rear of the theatre. They could make out the outline of a form coming down the centre aisle towards them.

'Dad!' came a surprised voice.

The footsteps raced down the aisle and up the stairs to the stage. Kitty virtually flew into her father's arms. While

Jessica looked on, the two of them held each other in a long, touching embrace. Kitty seemed to Oliver as if she would cry for joy.

'I'm fine, darlin',' he said, gently touching his daugher's cheek. 'There now.'

'I can't believe it!' she said. 'They let you go.'

'Yes, Kitty,' Jessica interrupted, firm, authoritative, controlled. 'We've identified the real killer of Bridget O'Hara.'

Kitty was confused. 'Identified?' she asked. 'Not arrested?'

'Not yet,' said Jessica, narrowing her eyes into a stare which made Kitty uncomfortable. 'You see, both the Inspector and I would like to see the killer come forth voluntarily. It will make things much easier on her.'

The news took Oliver by surprise. '*Her*?' he asked quizzically. 'But I thought Danny Briggs . . .'

Jessica shook her head. 'No, not Danny. The killer was someone else. Someone with a very *personal* reason to kill Emma Macgill and who ran down Bridget in the mistaken belief she was killing Emma.'

Oliver shivered as a draft blew across stage. His release. The empty theatre. The secret meeting with Kitty. It all added up to make him suddenly suspicious of Jessica and her motives.

'What's this all about?' he demanded of Jessica.

Methodically, choosing her words carefully, Jessica began to explain:

'One thing seemed strange about those three earlier attempts on Emma,' she said straightforwardly. 'They took place on consecutive *weekends*, as if they had been attempted by someone who lived and worked elsewhere during the week.'

Jessica's statement was strangely without accusatory tones; in fact, it was simply matter-of-fact. But provocative to anyone who had anything to hide. Which is why Kitty Trumbull looked at Jessica sharply, holding her gaze as long as she could before she felt the need to check her

father's reaction. His face was blank and expectant. Jessica unfolded her arms and pointed a finger at Kitty, moving towards her.

'You called your father at the Cumberland, Kitty,' she said. 'The concierge says it was 9:00 o'clock.'

'He's a liar,' Kitty said, vehemently denying Jessica's inference. 'I called at 8:00.'

Jessica waved her hand, dismissing the issue. 'Eight or 9:00 is not the point. How did you know where to find him?'

The question caught Kitty completely off guard. Jessica had been waiting to ask it since last evening in Scotland Yard when she first learned of Kitty's call. The best answer Kitty could muster was a weak, 'What?'

'You weren't with him when he went to the director's office,' she explained. 'You went shopping and later to a travel agency – to arrange for your seaside holiday. There's no way you could have known he'd be in the lobby of the Cumberland unless you'd heard that phone message.'

Oliver began to realise the significance of Jessica's line of questioning. 'Kitty?'

'Don't listen to her! Dad!'

Oliver turned pleadingly away from his daughter. 'Jessica?'

'I'm sorry, Oliver, this gives me no pleasure, believe me,' she told him. 'You see, if Kitty had heard that director's message, then she also heard the one from Emma. Of course, she had no way of knowing Emma was hiding at the Streatham flat so she drove to Emma's house on Chelsea Road,' Jessica explained. 'As she arrived, Bridget – wearing Emma's coat – came out, started to cross the street . . .'

Kitty interrupted explosively. 'All right,' she stopped Jessica. 'All right.'

Oliver felt something deep within him collapsing. It was hard to believe that the daughter he loved was capable of murder. Kitty began to dissolve in sobs. He hardly recognised her face as that of his little girl. Overwhelmed by the

need to comfort her, he turned her towards him and held her gently by her shoulders.

'Why, Kitty?' he asked, shaking his head. 'Emma never harmed you.'

'But she was destroying *you*, Dad,' Kitty blurted out through her tears. 'Or couldn't you see it? You were so magnificent, with a God-given gift that you prostituted to become a second-rate music hall comic. You couldn't break away. Every year you got weaker and more dependent while I stood by and watched. You couldn't help yourself, Dad. But I could. Don't you see? I had to kill her – for *you*.'

Oliver's heart went out to her and, folding her into his arms, he held her close.

'Oh, Kitty girl,' he said soothingly, patting her gently on the back.

'But I wouldn't have let you got to jail, I swear,' she cried, looking up into his face seeking forgiveness.

'I know that darlin',' he said. 'I know that.'

He pulled her tighter to him as if he could never let go, because to let go might mean never seeing her again. Like a child, Kitty clung to her father and buried her face in his shoulder.

How Jessica wished it had not come to this.

CHAPTER TWENTY

After accompanying Kitty and Oliver to New Scotland Yard where Kitty gave herself up to the custody of Inspector Crimmins, Jessica, physically tired and emotionally exhausted as well, returned to her hotel, chauffeured by a polite young detective.

Upon entering the lobby, she was handed a note by the smiling concierge. Wondering if there was some added development in the Bridget O'Hara case, she opened it hastily. But this had nothing to do with solving murders at least not in real life. Her publisher had called. Would she be so kind as to ring him in New York at her earliest convenience.

How had he tracked her down here? she wondered. Or why? was more to the point. Much as she dreaded facing her publisher and admitting that her new book was not developing as quickly as she would like, she knew she couldn't avoid putting the call off for more than a day. With the six hour time difference between London and New York, there was still time to reach the New York offices.

Happily, the call cheered her. Jessica's publisher, James Ryter, Sr. – a spry, distinguished older gentleman who had built his empire on some of America's most famous young novelists in the 1920's – inquired whether she could meet with him in New York on her return from London. He had a surprise for her. A surprise? What could it be? she wondered. He refused to disclose the details. Besides the surprise, he, his marketing people, and Jessica's editor,

Virginia Frazier, wanted to discuss promotion for her latest book which, incidentally, had received marvellous advance reviews.

'We have every reason to believe it will be a bestseller,' James Ryter, Sr., told her, then added, 'and, dear lady, the movie companies are already snooping about to get a sneak look at the manuscript.'

They laughed about how badly the last movie adaptation had turned out; still, bad as it was, it had generated added interest in her books.

'You've no objection to the stopover then?' Mr Ryter inquired. 'Of course, we'll pay your expenses.'

'That's very kind of you,' Jessica said. She actually brightened at the prospect. 'I expect my family in New York will thank you for luring me to town.'

Jessica thought of her great Aunt Agnes, in a nursing home in nearby Sunnyvale, and her niece, Nita, who was still performing on that soap opera. What was it called? *Private Lives?* No, that was the Coward play. Anyway, it had been too long since she had seen Nita and Agnes . . . Her thoughts were interrupted by James Ryter, who was posing the one question she had hoped to avoid:

'How's the new one coming?'

She didn't dare tell him it wasn't coming at all.

'What's it about?' he inquired like a curious boy.

Without missing a beat, Jessica responded, 'It's a fascinating story . . . set in London . . . about someone who tries to murder a famous English singer, and kills her dresser by mistake.'

'Terrific,' shouted Ryter gleefully over the wire, 'I always love a good murder in the theatre.'

Hurriedly, as to avoid more details about the mystery, Jessica explained to her publisher there would be no problem in her coming to New York. He needn't even send a limousine to the airport. She would ask her niece to meet her plane.

When she rang, Jessica found herself unusually ebullient

and excited by the prospect of visiting family. Wouldn't Aunt Agnes just relish all the gossip about Cousin Emma?

The fields and the manor houses on the environs of Heathrow Airport made for a beautiful, last glimpse of England as Jessica sped along the roadway to catch her flight to New York.

Traffic on the approach to the airport was busy, though it caused only a slight delay. The cabbie was apologetic. Jessica was unflustered and gracious. She had plenty of time.

Stepping out of the cab, Jessica took her suitcase from the driver and paid the fare. As he tipped his hat and climbed back into the cab, Jessica was already on her way to the terminal entrance. She stopped suddenly at the sound of a familiar voice.

'Jessica!' It was Emma.

Spinning around, Jessica saw Emma and Oliver approaching.

'Thank heavens,' said Oliver, his face flushed from running, 'We thought we'd missed you. Got hung up in a lot of bureaucratic nonsense.'

Emma was beaming. 'Wonderful news!' she said. 'Kitty's been admitted to St. Martin's Sanitarium.'

'That's so good to hear,' replied Jessica.

Oliver put in, 'At least she won't be going to prison. Thank God for that.'

Jessica looked at them with an expression of great concern. 'You know she's terribly disturbed, Oliver. She'll need help for a long time.'

'Well, she can depend on me,' he said.

'*Both* of us,' Emma joined in, taking Oliver affectionately by the arm. 'I'm selling the Mayhew, Jessica,' she continued. 'No sense clinging to a sinking ship.' Jessica noted that the decision seemed to have brought a new peace and radiance to Emma's face. She even looked younger. 'Anyway, I've got things to do before we pop off to the hereafter.'

Jessica smiled, saying, 'I'm so happy for both of you.' She held out her hands to Emma, who took them, then embraced her warmly. Oliver was next. He kissed his cousin-in-law-to-be on the cheek.

Jessica's eyes misted over. 'Now I expect letters, and progress reports,' she told them.

'Oh, absolutely,' Oliver assured her, 'If we find the time, that is.' He winked.

'Oh?'

Emma explained. 'We've found this absolutely delightful little theatre out in the country, only a mile or two from the sanitarium . . .'

'Boarded up now,' Oliver interrupted. 'A terrible mess. But a man with imagination might do something with it. I thought we might start with *Romeo and Juliet*. My Friar Laurence has always been magnificent.'

'Sounds marvellous,' said Jessica.

Emma had her own notions about the theatre's opening programme. 'And *I* thought we might begin with a modest production of *Gypsy*. I fancy I could make a proper Rose.'

Caught between the pair, Jessica offered, rather meekly, 'Yes, well, that would be nice, too.'

'Shakespeare, Em,' insisted Oliver. 'Heart and soul of English theatre.'

'Folks still love a good song, Ollie,' said Emma, holding firm.

'Shakespeare, darling.'

'*Gypsy*, love.'

The debate wasn't forthcoming with any solution. Unflinchingly, Emma and Oliver looked at each other. Then Oliver hatched an idea.

'I have it,' he said. 'We'll let Jessica decide.'

Brightening at the prospect of Jessica choosing with Solomic wisdom, they turned to her, full of expectation.

She looked blankly from one to the other. Give her a good murder to solve any day, she thought to herself, but this . . . She started to say something when she heard her

flight called over the public address system. Any further delay and she'd miss it.

'Break a leg!' she said, and left them, waving good-byes. What a sweet, darling couple they made. True, they'd been through an ordeal, but they'd emerged full of greater love and caring for one another.

The painful past was receding behind them.

End of Act I in their lives, Jessica thought as she entered the terminal.

On to Act II . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Aboard the jumbo jet, Jessica watched the greens and browns of England give way to the blue of the ocean beneath her, then took out a notebook and began jotting down ideas for a new murder mystery. Perhaps there was some way she could incorporate the recent events in her life into a story. Lately, her own experiences were beginning to parallel her books so much that her life was becoming one of those rare instances in which life imitated art, and art imitated life.

Yes, maybe there was a good mystery to be found in an English music hall setting, Jessica thought to herself. Who's to tell? Perhaps there was another mystery lying in wait for her in New York. Her niece Nita might supply her with a bit of TV gossip that would set the wheels of intrigue turning. Actors were always in the middle of such intrigue, show business rumours, romantic affairs, and the like. She would make a note to speak to Nita about it when she arrived.

In a richly appointed study befitting a fourth generation New York financier, a writer was at work on his typewriter. Felix's eyes saw nothing but the page before him. The heavy wood panelling in the room caught the warm yellow glow of his desk lamp and the flicker of the flames in the fireplace. The typewriter's tapping sounds punctuated the air, accenting the crackling of the wood in the grate. Ruggedly handsome with a strong jaw, broad shoulders, and a shock of black hair, Felix looked like the descendant

of a patrician Eastern family who had inherited this manor house and library. He seemed at home with the leather-bound volumes which filled the bookshelves from floor to ceiling.

Although a storm raged outside – the tree branches blowing in the wind and scraping against the panes of the high French windows – Felix was lost in concentration. His story charged his fingers with energy as it poured out of his head, through his fingertips, and onto the page before him. Except for his desk, the rest of the room was deliberately dark so as not to distract him. The fire cast elongated shadows on the ceiling. Felix paid no attention.

So involved was he in his work that he failed to notice a beautiful, alluring woman standing in the doorway. Sybil was tall, with silky blonde hair that spilled over her diaphanous negligee. She tossed her head to the side as she silently watched Felix work. Finally, she spoke:

'Felix . . .'

He looked up briefly, pausing a moment to admire her sensuality. 'I need another fifteen minutes or so.'

'I need you,' Sybil replied.

'Ten minutes,' he said, going back to the typewriter without bothering to look back at her.

'Now,' she demanded.

Still typing at a fevered pitch, he said, 'I'll just finish this page.'

He flashed her a quick smile, which she returned with an inviting smile of her own before moving out of the doorway. Again, Felix gave himself to his work.

There was a noise in the room which escaped his hearing. A faint click. Then the sound of a door opening and quietly closing.

Felix finished the page and pulled it out of the typewriter. As he stood to switch off the brass desk lamp, he stepped toward the fire to warm himself. The rain pounded against the glass. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Inside the study, a shadowy figure slipped into the room and remained obscured by the darkness. Felix gazed into the flames.

Suddenly he had the feeling he was not alone. Whirling around, he caught a glimpse of an intruder wearing a topcoat with the collar turned up, and a hat with the brim turned down. And gloves. In the gloves was a .45 automatic.

'Who the devil are . . . ?' Felix began.

He saw the gun.

'You . . . !' he exclaimed, recognizing the figure.

The cloaked intruder snapped back the gun's hammer. Felix begged:

'No . . . please . . . listen . . .'

The gun was aimed at his stomach.

'What did any of us ever do to you?' he asked, pleading for his life.

His pleas fell on deaf ears. The gun exploded directly at his midsection. He cried, his arm grabbing his shoulder. He winced in pain and spun, slamming against the desk chair and falling with it to the floor. At that instant, there was another sudden sound in the room, an angry voice shouting:

'Cut! Stop the tape! Gimme some lights!'

Gordon LaMonica, the director of the soap opera scene, wasn't happy with the staged shooting. Blinding lights came up on the set and filled the entire sound stage with a flood of white. Even the cameramen running the three cameras had to squint. The shift from darkness to light was so sudden. Here he went again.

Temper outbursts had become a regular fixture on the set when Gordon LaMonica was directing. Talented, a rising directing 'star' in his mid-thirties, Gordon LaMonica didn't take pains to hide his ambition, or his annoyance. His temper snapped. He stormed out of the control booth where his eyes had been on the bank of monitors.

The 'killer' from the previous scene slumped into a chair. 'Felix' – a fine stage actor named Martin Grattop – rose to his feet when Gordon descended upon him. The director was so irate he nearly tripped over a teleprompter on his way to Martin. Meanwhile, actress Bibi Hartman, a real-

life beauty who had just stepped off the set as 'Sybil,' watched with interest. So did that respected elderly actor Julian Tenley, who sidled up next to her.

'Dammit, Martin, you were shot in the stomach, not the shoulder,' Gordon screamed. 'You deliberately ruined that take.'

'I told you I want you playing that scene the way it was written, Gordon,' he told the director firmly. Gesturing offstage, he added, 'She's not killing off *my* character like she did the others. I've got a contract.'

Everyone on the set knew that the 'she' Martin referred to was the dreaded Joyce Holleran, the writer-producer of *Our Secret Lives,* whose pen enjoyed power of life and death over the series' characters. Joyce was unfazed by the outburst. She was used to people taking exception with her plot twists by now. It really didn't matter to her what they thought. It was her show and she controlled it entirely. A plain woman to whom money had brought decent looks and a better wardrobe, Joyce Holleran flaunted her power, which did not endear her to the people with whom she worked. No number of designer suits or facelifts could disguise the ambition lurking underneath her fortyish face. As producer and head writer of the show, Joyce Holleran knew she didn't have to be liked – not even by the network brass who could not afford to lose her.

'All contracts come to an end,' Joyce remarked, 'just as they did with The Avenger's other victims.'

It was too much for Martin to resist laying the sarcasm on with a trowel. 'The Pittsfield Avenger – lifted mercilessly intact from one of your Hollywood potboilers.'

'To the network's delight,' Joyce smiled like a serpent.

'You can't kill off an entire cast!' Martin objected vociferously while his fellow actors looked on, wondering if they might be next.

'As the new producer and head writer, I can do anything I want, creatively,' Joyce told him. There was no spirit of compromise in her tone.

'You're "creating" a whole new show, with a character

nobody knows anything about!' Martin claimed, while Joyce smiled smugly, giving him points for being on to her plans.

Joyce went for the jugular. 'Giving me an option to get rid of yet another burned-out actor when I decide.'

Julian, the elderly actor who had been watching their exchange of verbal salvos from the sidelines, stepped in. 'Martin, may I say something?' he asked his fellow actor.

Martin quieted down and gave Julian the floor. After all, they all liked and respected Julian, whose occasional dottiness was endearing, and whose manner was always from a gentlemanly school of another era.

Julian turned to Joyce. 'Joyce, in daytime drama, changes like yours should be woven in over several months.'

Joyce was not about to listen to an old poop like Julian tell her how to do her job. She sighed, 'Julian, please . . .'

'You can't dent the iron maiden with logic,' blurted Martin. 'I'm calling my agent.'

Then he stormed off the set. Difficult as it was, Gordon had silently abided the exchange, but now he was without one of his leading actors thanks to the ego of the show's producer and head writer. He shot her a furious look. Joyce glowered back.

'We'll do the scene in Doctor Goodman's office next,' he told the cast and crew. Then he addressed the older actor: 'Julian?'

Julian was trying to be helpful. 'My dialogue for the scene where I examine Felix's dead body is cued into the teleprompters.'

Patiently, Gordon gestured toward the set. 'We don't have the actor, Julian.'

Julian felt something like a doddering old fool as he realized the director was correct. 'Oh, yes . . . well, whatever you want to do, Gordon.'

A touch pedantically, Julian then checked for his 'character' glasses – a pair of black horn-rimmed spectacles – and donned them. This was followed by his retrieving a stethoscope from his jacket pocket.

Gordon had other responsibilities to attend to. He directed the crew and Bibi away from the library set. As the entourage moved off into another area of the sound stage, the character of the 'killer' from the previous scene removed the hat and coat. Underneath was Nita Cochran, Jessica Fletcher's niece, who played the role of Courtney Lambeth in the show. Although Nita was young, mysteries were nothing new to her; as a child, she used to act out scenes from her aunt's novels. But the recent development on the set had made her upset. This, combined with her excitement over Aunt Jessica's arrival, made her somewhat edgy.

She approached Joyce, who was busy making notations in her script. 'Joyce, could I talk to you for a minute?'

'Later, Nita,' Joyce said, barely acknowledging her presence. 'I've got to see to the hospital room scene.'

Imperiously, Joyce strode off. Nita frowned darkly after her, which did not go unnoticed by Julian. The older actor gave her a friendly grin and patted her affectionately on the shoulder. Nita smiled. Just what the doctor ordered.

Remembering Aunt Jessica's flight, she checked her watch. If all went well with the rest of the shooting this morning, she should be able to get to Kennedy Airport in her car and drive them both to Sunnyvale for afternoon tea with Gram.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As the story editor of *Our Secret Lives*, Carol Needom had come to expect anything anything, that is, but recognition. When they handed out the Emmy Awards for best achievement in writing for a daytime soap opera, she could be sure that she would not be saying any 'thank yous' to her high school English teacher, and that Joyce Holleran would not be throwing any 'thank yous' her way either. At thirty, an intelligent, hard-working writer who wrote three quarters of the show ought to be doing better than taking a backseat to an egotistical, ranting prima donna like Joyce. And one of these days – if she ever got up the courage – Carol might tell her boss just that.

Today was not to be one of those days.

Carol's door burst open with such a fury that she thought it had been thrown off its hinges. It was not Carol's custom to knock; still, Carol wasn't accustomed to feeling like a drug dealer being besieged by the police. She didn't have much privacy in her cubby hole of an office, and she cherished the small space as her domain to create. Looking up from her latest programmable electronic typewriter, Carol braced herself for Joyce's fury.

'What's the matter?'

'Martin Grattop ruined the dress rehearsal taping,' Joyce fumed, slamming her notebook and script down on Carol's desk. Carol jumped backwards. 'He refused to die and that wimp director, Gordon LaMonica, let him get away with it.'

Good, thought Carol to herself. Good for Gordon for

standing up to the bitch. For the sake of appeasing Joyce, Carol had to appear concerned. 'Can't you edit the tape to make it look like he died?'

'Only if we want to be lazy about it.'

This must really be a dilemma. Joyce was biting one of her long, manicured nails.

Tearing the page out of her typewriter, Carol inserted a fresh sheet of paper. She knew all too well the repercussions of Joyce's rampage. 'So I've got another rewrite.'

'You're going to have to adjust the stuff in the hospital room,' said Joyce, pulling up a chair across from Carol. 'But keep the new running character, the Orderly. That's a terrific introductory scene for him.'

'Thanks, I liked it myself,' said Carol, knowing full well she would be the only one to ever hear the acknowledgement. No doubt Joyce had already proclaimed to the world that she had written the scene herself. Carol added, much to Joyce's displeasure, 'But it doesn't work if Felix isn't dead.'

'Make it work,' Joyce ordered tersely, and rose to leave. 'It shoots first thing tomorrow.'

Carol knew she would be up all night. Small wonder she was getting bags under her eyes. Just when she thought Joyce had gone, she heard her turn around and start back.

'By the way, did I leave my keys in here this morning?'

Now Carol was really ticked. 'I haven't seen them,' she told Joyce.

As Joyce left the room, anger and frustration hanging in her wake, a young actor nearly collided with her on his way into Carol's office. Todd Worthy was a darkly handsome, brooding actor, and the series love interest for Nita. Todd, in his late twenties, seemed forever restless, setting his ambitious sights on bigger and better things than *Our Secret Lives*.

'Joyce,' Todd said, stopping his producer in the hall.

Joyce held up her hand as if swearing on a Bible in court. 'Don't start again Todd,' she cautioned him. 'I'm up to my ears.'

She continued making her way down the hallway. Todd gave her a James Dean scowl which was wasted on her.

'I'm not kidding, Joyce,' he shouted. 'I want off the show. My agent's getting offers I can't turn down.'

That was enough to send Joyce into a tailspin. 'Because of *this* show,' she spat back at him, 'and don't you forget it. Say the words, Todd, collect the money, and count your blessings.'

'I've got a chance at the lead in . . .'

But Joyce was gone.

'Joyce?' He seemed on the brink of tears.

From her office Carol watched the entire exchange. She suddenly found herself lost in Todd's smouldering good looks.

'If it were up to me, I'd let you out,' Carol told him, removing her glasses.

Todd turned around at her and laughed. 'Thanks, Carol. I wish it *were* up to you. Be great for both of us.'

'Well, she *has* taken the show from nowhere to number two in the time slot,' Carol said, giving the devil her due.

'Killing off half the town of Pittsfield to do it,' Todd said contemptuously. 'Wish I were on her death list or she was.'

A look passed between them, a bond of understanding. Both of them were all too aware how Joyce Holleran had them trapped. Both knew the feeling of seeing no light at the end of the tunnel.

The large, round receptionist desk, down the hall from the sound stage, looked like a fortress designed to guard the executive suites. Nita caught up with her irritated producer just as Joyce's heels were moving across the marble floor at a good clip, headed toward her office. Nita wanted to get this confrontation over with in time to leave the studio for the airport. Joyce appeared to be preoccupied even as she walked. Nita wondered why she was frantically searching her jacket and skirt pockets. She didn't bother to ask, as it was none of her business anyway. Nita's business with

Joyce concerned only one thing the fate of her character on the show.

'My character hasn't been on the show that long,' she said to Joyce. 'What you've started between her and Todd's character . . .'

'Nita, I haven't decided who The Avenger is going to be when I unmask him.' Obviously, Joyce was annoyed about something.

'Or *her*,' put in Nita. 'Having me play your maniac killer isn't giving me the most reassuring feeling. . . .'

Joyce could easily have explained that someone had to play the killer until the decision was made, and Nita might have been somewhat reassured. But giving anyone that sort of consideration wasn't Joyce's style.

Nita continued pestering her, pleading and following Joyce past the secretary and into her plush office.

'. . . especially with my contract option coming due next month.'

Joyce's face lit up in a smile. Her annoyance vanished. Nita prayed she had won her battle.

'*There* they are,' Joyce said happily, spotting her keys on her desk. 'How in the world did they get here?'

'Joyce, please,' Nita begged for attention. 'I want to continue with the show. I need the work.'

Joyce's face clouded into a stern mask. 'If you're looking for job security, try Civil Service. Now, I'm sorry, Nita, I've got work to do.'

Nita felt like a school girl who had been called to the office and dismissed by the principal after a lecture. Then the anger welled up inside of her. How dare Joyce treat her, or anyone, that way. Even Joyce's secretary thought the same thing as Nita brushed past her on the way out. Now Nita had to get back to the set and wait around for her next scene. Which meant she would miss Aunt Jessica's plane. She'd better make arrangements for a driver to meet Jessica and take her to Grandma Agnes' nursing home in Sunnyvale. With any luck, they could at least enjoy the afternoon together. And if that horrible woman kept her

any longer, Nita would – she would – well, she would kill her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The hastily arranged car and driver met Jessica at the airport. So did a group of reporters tipped off to her arrival by her publisher's marketing people. The reporters detained her longer than immigration or customs officials. Weary, Jessica regretted not having been more prepared and alert to answer their questions.

But the trip up the Hudson River from Manhattan to Sunnyvale was beautiful and put a great distance between her and the reporters. The sky was a bright blue, and the trees lining the route were a splendid lush green. Preferring small town life herself, Jessica was surprised that so quaint an environment could be found just outside the bustling metropolitan area of New York. As the Hudson widened upstream, it looked far more inviting than did its grey waters along the shores of Manhattan.

Sunnyvale was a quiet, typical American small town, or so it seemed to Jessica as she travelled past the old brick storefronts of the downtown and on through the residential areas with their clapboard houses. Not unlike her own white Victorian in Cabot Cove.

Agnes' residence, Sunnyvale Rest Home, commanded a magnificent view of the Hudson River. Nestled among a grove of trees with an expansive lawn beyond its front porch, the large white house had been built during colonial times to serve as an inn. It was rumoured that General George Washington had stayed there. The renowned American writer Washington Irving had mentioned Sunnyvale in one of his stories. While the inn had been greatly

expanded in the intervening years since colonial days, it maintained its charm and character. Beds of summer flowers gave it a bright, cheerful atmosphere.

Jessica was worried that she would find Agnes to be terribly feeble. However, Agnes Cochran, even at age eighty, was bright of mind. Only her partial lameness made it painfully difficult for her to walk, making it necessary for her to be cared for in a nursing home.

Agnes insisted on sitting in her favourite white wicker chair on the front porch so she and Jessica could enjoy the view of the Hudson rolling downstream. Nita was on her way, Agnes assured Jessica. Jessica was pleased with how well her relative looked. Though Agnes was an invalid, she was too proud to neglect her appearance. She made a habit of dressing smartly every day and making herself up carefully. Her white hair was well-coiffed. She sported a bright blue suit and a red silk scarf. Just as Jessica had thought, the talk quickly turned to soap operas and Nita's role in *Our Secret Lives*.

'Making my sweet little Nita the Pittsfield Avenger would be utter folly,' Agnes said, scoffing at Joyce's intentions.

Although Jessica was not up to date on her soap operas, she plunged into the discussion with characteristic resourcefulness.

'Well, uh, from what you've told me, Agnes, I'd say folly and a sizeable stretch of dramatic license.'

Agnes jabbed the air with her finger. 'That dreadful woman has motives of her own, mark me. A piece of a successful television soap means big bucks.' While she spoke, Agnes grew increasingly vocal on the subject. 'Next to killing off Doctor Goodman, heaven forbid, her most ridiculous idea is killing Felix.'

'Felix?' asked Jessica, trying to follow.

Agnes expected her to know all the players. 'You know, Jessica,' she said impatiently, 'the one whose mother tried to poison him so she could run away to India with the Maharaja.'

These plots were more complicated than her own,

thought Jessica. 'I'll have to start watching more,' she told Agnes.

Agnes leaned in closely to Jessica. 'Nita's so sweet and gentle. Making her a multiple killer is . . . just . . . just . . .' Agnes was at a loss for words.

No sooner had she described her niece as fit company for the angels in heaven, than Nita came raging across the porch, still infuriated by her confrontation with Joyce. She had waited, and waited, and waited on the set, and then Joyce had decided not to use her anymore today. A pair of nurses standing about on the porch immediately recognized her and began gossiping. It was a rare day at the Sunnyvale Home when two celebrities came to visit. Most of the other elderly residents went about their business as usual, not even paying any mind to Nita's tirade.

'I swear I'm going to kill that woman,' Nita said, striding across the porch. She immediately regretted her words, but they were out and couldn't be reeled back into her mouth. She'd hoped to be over her anger by the time she greeted her Grandma Agnes and Aunt Jessica.

'Oh, Nita, don't tell me,' said her grandmother.

Nita bent over, giving Agnes a warm hug and kiss. 'Hi, Grandma.' Suddenly feeling self-conscious, she grinned. 'Talk about an entrance line, huh?'

Jessica grinned, and taking Nita's hands in hers, pulled her towards her. 'Hi, Aunt Jess,' said Nita. 'Sorry I couldn't meet your plane this morning.'

'Don't be. I escaped those publicity people only an hour ago,' she explained. 'This is the first free time I've had.'

Nita smiled at her Aunt Jessica, grateful that she was so understanding and forgiving. Sometimes it was hard for her to believe that anyone so famous could be so unassuming and kind. From the time she was a child, Nita had held her celebrated aunt in great esteem, a role model who inspired her in her own life and career. Nita secretly hoped Aunt Jessica was proud of her for the progress she'd made as an actress.

'Child,' Agnes, suddenly fearful, began, 'she hasn't made you The Avenger?'

'Not yet,' Nita replied, 'but it's right in the front of her small narrow mind.' When Nita caught herself dredging up her resentment again, she shifted to an upbeat mood. 'Now enough talk about the miseries of professional histrionics. Aunt Jess, you look terrific and how about Gram? Never better, huh?'

Jessica smiled at Nita and Agnes. Agnes beamed back at her. Jessica had to agree. Agnes was looking very fit, all things considered.

Later that afternoon, when Agnes grew tired and had to lie down for a nap, Jessica walked Nita to the parking area. Other visitors strolled the landscaped grounds as well, but none of them noticed the two celebrities in their midst. Here and there one nurse would spread the word to another that Jessica Fletcher and Nita Cochran were on the premises. While the male nurses were as excited as the females, and every bit as active in circulating the news, no one bothered either Jessica or her niece.

Alone with Nita, Jessica showed much more concern that she dared show in Agnes' presence, for fear of upsetting Agnes.

'Sure I'm worried,' admitted Nita, when Jessica inquired about her feelings. 'If my character does turn out to be The Avenger, then eventually I'll be written out of the show. No more fat weekly paychecks but the bills here go on.'

Jessica respected the way Nita was responsible for her grandmother's welfare. There was no reason she should shoulder the financial burden alone. 'If it comes to that,' she offered, 'you know I'd be happy to help.'

Now Nita had another reason to idolize her aunt. Jessica was as generous as she was brilliant and modest.

'Oh, I know,' she said gratefully, 'and thanks. But this is my responsibility. She's been mother and father to me for half my life.' Jessica nodded her understanding as Nita

changed the subject. 'Look, are we going to have some time together?'

'I was hoping we could have dinner tonight,' said Jessica.

'I'd love to, but I've got to spend this evening working on my dialogue. It's how I spend all my week nights. Tomorrow I've got two big scenes with Todd and Julian Tenley.'

This time Jessica refrained from inquiring about the other characters. There were too many to sort out all at once.

'I'm in town for such a short time this trip,' Jessica told her regretfully.

'How about coming to the set tomorrow?'

'Oh, I'd just be in the way,' said Jessica, knowing there would be no opportunity to talk with her niece on the set. 'Anyway, I have a meeting with my publisher at 10:00.'

'Saturday,' suggested Nita. 'We'll have the whole day.'

'Got to be home by Friday,' Jessica replied apologetically. 'The roofers are coming . . .' Nita seemed disappointed. 'You wouldn't *believe* the hickory nuts the squirrels have been storing under my shake shingle roof. I'll have trees sprouting from the eaves if I don't . . .'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

From where director Gordon LaMonica stood in the glass control booth above the set, the bedroom looked real enough. He checked its appearance on the monitor as one of the three cameras pulled back to include a master shot of the set. The set came into clear focus. But the lights were wavering back and forth. Gordon looked out across the cavernous sound stage and saw the source of the trouble a lighting director on a ladder adjusting one of the smoking hot arc lamps. On the floor below, an assistant pulling heavy cords of electrical cables trailed the rolling cameras while they found their positions. Set decorators added finishing touches to the bedroom. Gordon's voice, coming from out of nowhere like the word of the Almighty himself, filled the stage as he instructed the lighting man on setting the light. The other technicians hurried to complete their assignments. At busy times such as these, Gordon was hardly aware of the presence of producer Joyce Holleran beside him taking copious production notes of her own.

Elsewhere about the set, the actors were preparing for the next take. Nita and Julian, both of them true professionals, were confident they were ready, and spent the waiting period talking. Todd, who stood nearby, went over his lines, silently repeating them to himself as he got into character. Nita glanced up towards the booth and saw their nemesis, the ever-bothersome Joyce, emerging from the booth with a handful of written instructions which were certain to make somebody on the set jump before long. Fortunately for Nita, Todd was about to be her target. Nita

watched the producer-writer move in on him. So did Julian, who appeared to take a deliberate position nearer Todd, ostensibly to turn over his pair of glasses and stethoscope to the prop man nearby. Nita wondered if he wasn't doing it intentionally to be privy to their conversation.

'I assumed you were saving yourself in that love scene run-through,' Joyce said coldly to Todd.

'I'm doing everything I can to save myself in *all* your scenes, Joyce,' he said sarcastically. 'Why don't you let Carol write them for me – *her* way – let her give my character something to do outside the bedroom set.' Todd hated the way Joyce seemed to regard him as little more than a sex object; now he understood how women felt about sexist men.

Having overheard their conversation, Julian, assuming his favourite role as family patriarch, approached.

'Now, now, you two,' he said benevolently. 'Let's not let a long day and frazzled nerves make us say things we don't really mean.'

Joyce had no patience for his meddling. 'Julian, if you don't mind. . . .'

'Anger let to stand only festers,' he said, hoping his words of wisdom might be of some benefit. 'Come on, now, kiss and make up.'

Joyce would have no part of being diplomatic. Maintaining her air of superiority and dominance, she grimaced and stalked off. Todd scowled after her. Julian sagely shook his head.

'Todd, my boy,' he said, 'let it go. Some of us have to work a little harder to keep peace in the family.'

Not caring much for the old actor's self-righteousness, Todd shot him a disgusted look.

Across the stage, one of the heavy, acoustically padded doors opened and Jessica stepped tentatively inside, carefully closing the door behind her. The stage was much larger than she'd anticipated. And colder too. Probably because of the hot lights, she thought, and pulled a pale blue cashmere sweater up around her shoulders. Her eyes

adjusted to the change of light from the bright hallway to the dark corner of the soundstage.

Assuming that Nita was over in the brightly lit area of the stage, Jessica squinted and looked in her direction. Her niece appeared to be sitting in a director's chair behind one of the cameras. Jessica hoped Nita wouldn't mind her sudden decision to accept her invitation. The meeting with her publisher had been shorter than planned, and his mid-town Manhattan office was only a short walk along Central Park from the studio sound stage and nearby network offices.

While the activity on the set continued, Nita, growing bored with the tediousness of it all, picked up a newspaper and began to read. Details, details. Whoever thought TV stardom made for a glamourous life had it all wrong. First you stay up all night learning lines. Then you face an early morning makeup call, complete with a stale doughnut and a cup of coffee, if you're lucky. After that, you wait around interminably for the producer or director to make up his mind what he wants . . . or for a technician to fix a broken microphone or burned-out lamp. Nita looked up from the paper to see if any progress was being made. She caught a glimpse of Aunt Jessica, making her way unobtrusively across the stage, carefully stepping over the cables and between the rolling cameras. Jessica gave Nita a little wave. Putting the paper down in the script pouch on the arm of the chair, Nita smiled and rose to greet her.

'You came after all,' she said, obviously pleased.

'I can't stay, Nita,' said Jessica quietly. 'I wanted to discuss something that . . .'

Taking her arm, Nita said playfully, 'Oh, no. I've got you, and I'm going to keep you. There's some wonderful people I want to show you off to.'

With that, she steered Jessica towards the back of the stage where a row of makeup tables with lighted mirrors stood.

At one of the tables, veteran actor of the Broadway stage and TV soap operas, Herbert Upton, donned his makeup

for his role as Police Inspector Holcomb. As the inspector, he sported a.38 police special in a shoulder holster which he wore over his shirt sleeves. He was assisted in applying his pancake base by Letha, the show's makeup artist, a young, energetic, stylish woman. Happy to have a few free moments to memorize his lines, Herbert Upton finally left the makeup chores to Letha and devoted his full attention to the script pages. His involvement in an off-Broadway show in a downtown repertory theatre the night before hadn't left the dedicated actor much time to learn his lines. Now in his late forties, Upton required at least a few hours sleep to maintain his busy acting schedule.

Upton's co-actor Bibi was less concerned with her dialogue than her crow's feet, which she peered at intently in the mirror next to Upton's. She supposed Letha had done the best she could with them. Bibi had to face the fact that she would soon be moving on to more mature roles. Catching her from the corner of his eye, Robert Upton guessed at her anxiety.

'"A woman's nae a woman til time dost line her face,' he said in a theatrical Scot's brogue. 'For tis time that brings true beauty, and charm, and quiet grace."'

Bibi gave him a look and pointed her finger. 'Robert Burns,' she guessed.

The seasoned actor pointed to himself. 'Herbert Upton.'

Bibi shrugged her shoulders and turned back to glare at the crow's feet in the mirror. She picked up a tube of cover-up as a last resort. 'Which means, darling,' she said to Herbert, 'that your deathless line was churned out by our very own Hollywood hacksmith, Joyce Holleran.' She paused, smearing some makeup around her eyes to fill in the lines. 'Did you see?' she asked Herbert. 'She cut my big seduction scene with Todd. Hope that's not a bad omen.'

Before Herbert Upton could voice his opinion of the situation, Nita and her aunt approached from behind.

'Bibi. Herbert,' said Nita. 'I'd like you to meet my Aunt Jessica Fletcher.'

Her mind more on Joyce Holleran's machinations than on social pleasantries, Bibi replied by rote, extending her hand to Jessica. 'Your aunt. How lovely. I'm pleased to meet you.'

Herbert Upton, on the other hand, was truly impressed. 'Jessica Fletcher, the writer?' Jessica humbly nodded. 'Oh, this *is* a pleasure.'

Jessica made a point of graciously including both Herbert and Bibi in her conversation. Hearing the tone of respect in Herbert's voice, Bibi decided Jessica was worthy of her attention.

'The pleasure is mine, to meet you,' Jessica told them. 'The art of acting has always intrigued me.'

'Aren't you nice.' Bibi gave Jessica her best actress smile.

They were unexpectedly interrupted by another visitor to the set. Larry Holleran was no stranger to the *Our Secret Lives*. A bit actor himself, he had met Joyce Holleran during an audition for another soap opera in Hollywood. She was Joyce Wilmes then. Larry got the small role in that soap; more significantly, he got Joyce. He had no passion for either acting or Joyce, though he did have a passion for the good things in life. Joyce could provide him with those. Larry settled. The house in Beverly Hills and the New York penthouse made his lot in life easier. In his mid-thirties and handsome, Larry could still pursue an acting career. But taking care of Joyce's life had become a full-time job. Even if she gave her blessing to his acting again, he privately doubted that anyone would regard him as anything other than Joyce Holleran's kept man.

When Larry Holleran approached them, Jessica picked up on a subtle chemistry between him and Bibi. He seemed too familiar as he placed his hands on the back of her chair and greeted everyone. And Bibi seemed too glad to see him. In the back of her mind, Jessica wondered whether they were having an affair. She certainly thought so. As soon as she was introduced to Larry, Jessica recognized the name from somewhere.

'Holleran?' she asked.

'Joyce's husband,' Nita explained.

'Oh, yes,' she said, smiling at him. 'I'm pleased to meet you.'

'Mrs Fletcher,' said Larry Holleran, shaking hands with her. Whatever else he may have been, Larry was certainly a poised gentleman. Judging from what Jessica had heard about Joyce's egotistical, tempermental nature from Agnes and Nita, she was not unsympathetically disposed towards Larry Holleran. The man was obviously a lost soul who had his reasons for seeking companionship other than his wife's. And Bibi was an attractive woman.

Sensing a certain amount of tension created by Larry's arrival, Bibi sought to make everyone more relaxed.

'Herb said you write, Mrs Fletcher,' Bibi said.

'And I've read every book you've had published,' said Herbert, playing the fan.

'That's very flattering,' Jessica laughed graciously.

'I read all kinds of detective works,' he explained to her. 'Helps me git into my character of Lieutenant Holcomb and give it a gritty realism.'

Larry Holleran turned to Jessica and Herb, teasing the latter good-naturedly.

'Talk about getting into his character: When I shot a burglar in our apartment last year, Herb wanted to handle the case for the Robbery Detail.'

Everyone laughed as Herbert, chuckling, jokingly denied Larry's gibe. Jessica was surprised that Larry would make light of the fact that he shot a man. His admission gave him another, harder dimension that she'd initially imagined.

Jessica noticed the way Larry casually moved his hands from the back of Bibi's chair to her shoulders. He leaned over and spoke to her:

'Bibi, could I see you for a minute?' Then he turned to Jessica and flashed her a grin full of too-perfect capped teeth. 'Mrs Fletcher, a pleasure.'

Saying their good-byes, he and Bibi excused themselves and retreated to the refreshment table a ways off. Nita observed her aunt staring after them, her mind assessing

their relationship. She was certain Aunt Jess had them figured out. Looking after them as they stole away, Herbert Upton wondered whether Joyce would catch them conferring privately. There would be hell to pay if she did. The elderly prop man interrupted Herb's thoughts. Reaching for Herb's.38, he said:

'This won't be used any more today, Herb. I'll lock it up in the prop box.' He retrieved the gun from Herb's holster, and Herb went back to his script. Letha resumed work on his makeup.

Drawing her Aunt Jess away from the makeup area, Nita couldn't resist flicking a look over at Larry and Bibi, who pretended to be occupied at the coffee machine. They laughed too easily together to be merely enjoying a cup of coffee together. Nita was stunned to see that Larry was even daring enough to touch her. Jessica observed her niece's interest in the couple.

'There's no explaining some people's hormonal drive,' Nita finally said to Jessica.

'Bibi's a courageous lady,' Jessica remarked, 'all things considered.'

Nita motioned Jessica back towards the set. 'C'mon, I don't want to be around if the Dragon Lady suddenly shows.'

As they strolled between the flats, household props, furniture, and artificial shrubbery off camera, Jessica took advantage of their time alone to confide in her niece.

'Nita, the reason I came is that my publisher collected a windfall in foreign royalty payments on my books. It was a surprise to me, and money I never expected. I'd really like you to use it to help with Agnes' care.'

'No, Aunt Jess. That's good of you, but I don't want it.' She began to explain. 'I . . .'

She was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Julian Tenley in his physician's jacket.

'Now here's a charming twosome,' he greeted them buoyantly.

'Oh, Julian,' Nita said, surprised by Julian's forwardness.

'This is my Aunt Jessica. This dear soul is Julian Tenley. He plays Doctor Goodman.'

'Delighted, Mr Tenley,' said Jessica, shaking the old actor's hand.

'You've got to call me Julian,' Tenley insisted. 'I mean Nita *is* my niece in the show. If you're her aunt, we've got to be related.'

'Very well,' Jessica laughed. 'Julian it is.'

Julian affectionately put his arm around Nita. 'This wonderful young lady is very special to me.'

Jessica beamed, pleased that her niece was so well liked and respected by her colleagues.

'We'd all be lost without him,' said Nita, returning Julian's warmth.

'I'd be lost without my family,' remarked Julian, with what appeared to be all earnestness. Checking his watch, he quipped, 'And I'll be no good to perform surgery in the morning if I don't get home and get some rest.' He took Jessica's hand again and gave it a little pat. His kindly eyes sparkled. 'Jessica, I want to get to know you. See you children tomorrow.'

When Julian was gone, Nita asked Jessica:

'Isn't he wonderful? He's been the heart of the show for thirty years. He'll never be cut from the cast.'

'Lucky man,' said Jessica, although she privately speculated as to whether anyone was safe from the woman popularly referred to as the Dragon Lady.

'Lucky and *rich*,' Nita made a point of noting. 'I heard he sold his percentage in the show back to the network for enough to live a dozen lifetimes.'

'And he keeps working?' Jessica inquired, wondering why he wouldn't want to retire; perhaps do theatre.

Nita shrugged. 'The show's his life. Talk about getting into his character: He can't tell where Julian Tenley ends and Doctor Eliot Goodman begins.' Yes, Jessica had thought he took his part rather seriously that business about getting ready for surgery and all. 'The only concession to his age has been the teleprompters,' Nita continued. 'You'd never know he was reading his lines.' Jessica laughed. Nita took her by the hand. 'Come on. I want to show you the set.'

Jessica agreed to the tour. But afterwards, she *must* really be getting back to her hotel. The jet lag from London was beginning to catch up with her, and before long she would be needing a teleprompter to remember *her* lines.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jessica's publisher, James Ryter, Sr., was spending his share of Jessica's European royalties nearly as fast as they came in, or so it appeared to Jessica. Though tired, Jessica couldn't decline his last-minute invitation to dine with him. Life in the fast lane, she thought. Her life in Cabot Cove, Maine, with its tiny population of 3,500, was much simpler; while she enjoyed living grandly in New York, she yearned to return home and lose herself in her house cleaning. Even so, there was no denying that the fine French cuisine was as rich as the conversation – making for a memorable evening. When it was over, Jessica's limousine dropped her at her posh Upper East Side hotel.

The blinking red light on the phone in her suite alerted Jessica to an awaiting message. Putting her purse down on the bed beside the phone, she noted the time: 9:30. Still a chance for a good night's sleep. She would hardly be awake long enough to appreciate the room which was lavishly decorated in an array of French antiques. The management had also been so kind as to give her a basket of fruit and a vase filled with freshly cut flowers.

Reaching for the phone, Jessica dialled the front desk.

'This is Mrs Fletcher, suit 1210. You have a message for me . . .' she waited, kicking off her shoes while the desk clerk checked. 'My niece? Did she leave a number? Save me looking it up . . . Oh, good. Will you ring her for me, please?'

While on hold, Jessica removed her earrings and placed

them on the night stand. The switchboard operator came back on.

'No answer?' Jessica asked upon learning the operator hadn't reached Nita. 'Are you sure you dialled the right number? She's supposed to be at home, studying her . . . Never mind. Thank you, operator.'

Hanging up the phone, Jessica wondered where Nita might be. It wasn't like her to shirk her responsibility to the show. Perhaps something had come up or gone wrong. Jessica was worried as she began to undress for bed. If her anxiety persisted, she might not be able to sleep. Jessica sighed to herself. In that case, she would try to write.

Not far from Jessica's hotel, in a small, elegant brick apartment building in the East 50's, Joyce Holleran was busy writing. Like the character in her soap opera, Joyce preferred writing in almost total darkness. A single lamp illuminated her typewriter. Her penthouse office, while by no means cosy, was a retreat for Joyce from the rest of the house. With its glassed-in walls overlooking the lights of mid-town Manhattan – most prominently, the beam from the top of the Citicorp Building – the office had an ivory tower feeling.

The work was going well tonight. She smiled, satisfied with the way the master plot was taking shape. The pages were piling up beside the typewriter. She inserted another blank page into the carriage and resumed her rapid pace at the keyboard.

Larry appeared at the study door with a highball glass in hand. He stood and watched, taking a drink. She didn't bother to turn around to acknowledge his presence. Sometimes Larry felt as invisible as a butler; then again, he had to admit, his salary for services rendered was not bad. He had few complaints about the arrangement, though, God knows, Joyce found enough wrong with him to critique his every move. Almost every day of his life Larry wondered how much longer they could go on like this. Forever, from the looks of things.

Larry forced himself to be cheerful. 'Hey there, tycoon. Time to take a break.'

Without interrupting her work, Joyce told him, 'Pour yourself another drink, Larry.'

'How about if I pour one for you?' he suggested.

'I'm working.'

'Come on, I've been rattling around by myself since 4:30 this afternoon.'

She broke from her work and shot him a cutting look. 'Poor darling is bored?' she said, sounding like a spoiled child. 'Why don't you give Bibi a call?' she added sarcastically. 'I'm sure she could break the monotony for you.'

Larry maintained his cool. His smashing white smile was ready. He oozed charm. 'You gonna start *that* again, sweetheart? Hey I love *you*.'

Joyce threw her head back and laughed. 'We both know what we both "love", Larry. Now leave me alone. I want to have this "cast obituary" finished for tomorrow.'

The charm was gone; his voice, suddenly tight. 'Yeah, sure, hon,' he said, knowing he'd been dismissed like the servant he was. 'Guess I'll go by the Friar's Club for a while.'

'Do that,' she said, already back at her work. Then she paused as he started out the door. 'And Larry, I may call you later so be there – because if you're not, I may be forced to cut your *allowance* off.'

Larry's face smouldered with anger. But he swallowed it, just as he had on so many other occasions.

Joyce heard his heavy footsteps, the leather Gucci heels, clomping across the hardwood floor. Annoyed by the interruption, yet otherwise unruffled, she found her place on the page and returned to the story outline. She barely jumped at the sound of the front door opening and slamming. She glanced at the clock above her desk and made a mental note to check with the Friar's Club in an hour. Contentedly immersed in the lives of her characters, she found great happiness typing on and on.

The shadowy figure that slipped surreptitiously beside

the door to her office might have been one of Joyce's creations.

In a sense, it was. But all too real.

Moments later, Joyce became aware she was not alone. A wave of nervousness suddenly passed through her. She pushed her chair back from the desk and made her way towards the door to investigate.

The Avenger stood before her, dressed exactly as he was on the set of the show. Initially, Joyce thought she was dreaming. Her knees weakened. She realized this was no dream. Paralyzed with fear, and trying not to show it, she froze and gasped.

'Nita?' she stammered. There was no answer. Joyce attempted to conceal her panic with a flash of bravado. 'What are you doing in that ridiculous . . . How did you get in here?'

Then she saw the.45 as if it were hanging suspended in space and time, pointing directly at her. She was hit with a tidal wave of *déjà vu*. Of course she had experienced this before; she had written it and witnessed it being acted only a day before. The blood drained from her face while The Avenger steadied the gun, levelling it directly at her abdomen.

'My God, no!' she shrieked.

The hammer was cocked. Time unreeled painfully slow. Joyce felt cold beads of sweat forming on her brow.

'Nita,' she begged, '*no, please!*'

Seemingly gigantic, the gun was extended towards her. Joyce commanded her legs to move. She turned as to escape the inevitable.

A flash of light as the gun exploded. Then, a descending darkness. A murky fog. The room spinning, turning topsy turvy.

The Avenger watched impassively. The victim staggered, tripped, falling onto the desk before hitting the floor. Nonchalantly, The Avenger stepped over the body to retrieve the pile of typewritten pages. The figure in the

black topcoat with upturned collar left the office, the pages in hand.

This time, Joyce Holleran didn't hear the front door opening and closing; for Joyce Holleran, in writing the last scene in her life, had unwittingly written her own death.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

'The two suitcases and the clothes bag I want checked through to Cabot Cove.'

Jessica sincerely hoped the bellman understood her instructions. Her attention was divided between him, as he collected the bags in her suite, and the phone, as she tried again to reach Nita.

Her repeated unsuccessful attempts to get in touch with her niece had kept Jessica up the better part of the night. After taking a few bites from the hotel's complimentary fruit – not a complete breakfast, to be sure – she had busied herself packing for the trip home. How she wished she knew where Nita was, if only to put her mind at rest.

The bellman, noticing Jessica's frown, suspected he had done something wrong. The lady was in such a state; maybe just rushing to catch a plane, he finally assumed. Hanging up the phone, Jessica grabbed her purse and a small travel bag and followed the bellman to the door. As he reached for the doorknob, there was a knock coming from the other side.

The bellman admitted an official-looking man in a wrinkled grey suit, black horn-rimmed glasses, greying, rumpled hair, and a forty-year-old face lined by fifty years worth of creases. Flashing an N.Y.P.D. detective badge as if it were his entry ticket, the man pushed his way into the suite.

'Jessica Fletcher?' he asked very directly in a thick Brooklyn accent.

'Yes?' Jessica replied, consumed by a sudden, terrible feeling that something dreadful had happened to Nita.

'Name's Kaplan,' he identified himself. 'Sergeant. Homicide Division. Twenty-foist Precinct.'

'Homicide?' Jessica queried.

Sergeant Kaplan nodded. 'Lookin' for your niece, Nita Cochran.'

'I was just calling her. Is something wrong?'

Whatever Mr Kaplan's reasons, he was not forthcoming with any immediate information that would put Jessica's mind at ease. Instead, he left her question unanswered and proceeded to check the bathroom, closet, and bedroom even going so far as to look under the bed. Jessica wondered what on earth he expected to find.

'You don't mind if I check and see if she's hiding out here?' he asked, as if Jessica had any choice in the matter.

Controlling her temper, Jessica was nevertheless perturbed. 'Hiding out? Why would she be . . . ? Sergeant, will you please tell me what this is about?' she demanded.

The police detective was too preoccupied to interrupt his search. Even the bellman was startled by his brusque behaviour. Awkwardly, he hovered in the background holding the bags and felt like an interloper. Pulling a document from inside his jacket pocket, Sergeant Kaplan finally explained:

'Got here a warrant for the arrest of one Nita Cochran on suspicion of murder of a certain Joyce Holleran. Attempts at locating said suspect . . .'

'Murder?' she said, a look of incredulity and concern sweeping across her face. Nita a murderer? The very thought of it was absurd! Nevertheless, it would be a good idea if the bellman left her bags in the room. She would not be leaving New York just yet.

The squad room of the Twenty-First Precinct of the New York Police Department was alive with the sound of typewriters, telephones, and crackling squad car radio reports. It was not a soothing place for a man with a hangover.

Larry Holleran was such a man. He was not only hung over, but in need of a shave and a long, hot bath. It was bad enough that he should be brought to this God-awful place; it was worse that he had to listen to the grating, relentless voice of detective Lt. Vincent Antonelli.

Antonelli was not about to let Larry Holleran off the hook. Unlike Larry, he had a great reserve of physical stamina. Youthful, tough, capable, and highly educated, this kid from the streets of Little Italy was nobody's fool least of all Holleran's.

' . . . at about 9:30 you said, you left your apartment to go to the Friar's Club,' Antonelli continued, his questions cutting into Larry Holleran's brain like a scalpel. 'Why didn't you go?'

'Lieutenant, please,' replied Holleran, his energy ebbing and his voice weak. 'What difference does it make?'

'It might establish your whereabouts at the time of your wife's murder.'

'You *know* who killed her!'

'And *you* admitted you had words with her.'

Larry Holleran sat upright and rubbed his bleary eyes. 'It was a spat,' he sighed. 'Not even that; every married couple has 'em certainly nothing that would lead to . . . look, my not going to the club: I was giving her something to think about if she happened to call me there . . .'

'So you did some bar hopping,' stated the lieutenant. 'Where?'

'I don't remember. I didn't even know I'd checked into that hotel until I woke up this morning. Look, give me a break, will you? I'm hung over. I'm sick . . .' His voice cracked. Taking deep breaths, he fought off tears. 'An hour ago I went home to have an officer at our apartment tell me my wife was dead.'

Antonelli was unswayed by Larry Holleran's display of grief. In the ten years he'd been a police officer, he'd seen too many murderers mourn for their victims. Tears didn't wash away guilt – or blood. Reclining back in his chair, Antonelli put his feet up on his desk. Maybe he wouldn't

get much more out of Holleran today. From the corner of his eye, he spotted Sergeant Kaplan escorting a smartly dressed, determined-looking, middle-aged woman towards him. About Holleran. Yeah – best to let him go, for now.

'Okay,' he told the suspect. 'Be where I can reach you if I need to, Mr Holleran.'

Larry Holleran rose from the chair. 'Of course, Lieutenant. Thank you.' He reached out his hand to shake Lieutenant Antonelli's. Antonelli didn't take it. Instead, he swivelled his chair around toward the policewoman who was approaching him, carrying what appeared to be some medical records. Holleran took the hint and left.

'That wouldn't be my autopsy report, would it?' he asked the policewoman, snatching it away from her. He grinned mischievously. 'Thank you.' Scanning the report, he commented, 'Very interesting.'

He looked up from the report to see Kaplan and the middle-aged woman standing over him. Without the formality of an introduction, Jessica interrupted:

'Lieutenant Antonelli?'

Kaplan smiled at the way his boss was disarmed by Jessica's direct approach. 'Name's Jessica Fletcher,' she said, introducing her. 'Nita Cochran's aunt.'

Antonelli started to greet her when Kaplan cut in:

'She writes books.'

Antonelli tried again; once more, Kaplan interfered:

'Detective mystery books.'

Before Kaplan could launch into another explanation, Antonelli moved to stop him. 'Okay, Kaplan.'

Kaplan took his cue to leave, heading away with a shrug. No need for Antonelli to get upset; he was only trying to do the best job he could.

Lieutenant Antonelli gestured for Jessica to take a seat.

She stared him directly in the eye, and in her most no-nonsense tone of voice proclaimed:

'Lieutenant, a serious mistake is being made here.'

'The mistake was the murder of Joyce Holleran.'

Jessica didn't disagree. She only took exception to the conclusions Antonelli was drawing from that murder.

'I can assure you it wasn't done by my niece.'

'Under the circumstances a natural opinion for you to have.'

Antonelli was testing her. If he gauged Jessica as the sort to give in, he was gravely wrong. The more he sparred with her, the fiercer she became, not unlike a lioness protecting her cub.

Feeling the advantage of age, wisdom, and experience were on her side, Jessica took the tone of a superior authority.

'Lieutenant, I am not unfamiliar with the criminal mind. Or the quixotic behaviour of noncriminals driven to emotional extremes.'

'Very fancy,' he said, adding a low whistle for emphasis. 'You're a practicing psychologist as well as a detective mystery writer.'

'No, I am not.'

Antonelli leaned forward, pulling his chair closer to Jessica. 'Mrs Fletcher, let me be frank. Your kind of writing is not my kind of reading.'

'Lieutenant, let me be franker,' she retorted without missing a beat. 'Anyone who could believe my niece capable of murder is being grossly overpaid for taking up valuable space in this office.'

Antonelli's look held with hers for a moment. Then he backed off. She made her point well. Arguing would get them nowhere, and there was still a murder to be solved. Antonelli reached across his desk and picked up a publicity still of The Avenger holding a.45 automatic. He proceeded to explain:

'This person was seen leaving by a couple entering the Holleran apartment building last night about 9:35.'

Jessica scoffed at the evidence. 'That "person" could be anybody from the cast of *Our Secret Lives*. Several of whom might feel they have very valid motives for murder.'

Antonelli raised his index finger to score another point.

'According to Gordon LaMonica, the show's director, you niece wore this wardrobe in several episodes.'

Listening to this dribble, Jessica was heating up with anger by the moment. 'And a stupid disguise for her to use, wouldn't you say?'

Her logic failed to alter Antonelli's preconceptions. While Jessica respected authority and did her best to cooperate whenever possible, the young, brash lieutenant was making it increasingly difficult for her. She thought his quick rise through the ranks and his dark Italian looks had given him the sort of arrogance that got in the way of one's job. Every time she tried to offer a sensible rebuttal, he overrode her.

Antonelli continued to present his case:

'Also, according to Mr LaMonica, her character was about to be written out of the show . . .'

Jessica tried to interrupt, but it was no use.

' . . . as were several others. I know . . .'

She tried again, with the same result.

'Each one of whom I have met with this morning and been given an accounting of their whereabouts at the time of the murder . . .'

Jessica began to interrupt in vain.

' . . . which gives added emphasis to the fact that along with the new series bible Joyce Holleran was writing at the time of her murder, your niece has disappeared without a trace.'

This time Jessica got in fast. 'Which could be accounted for by the fact the real killer has lured her away, possibly harming her, to cast suspicion on her.'

Antonelli listened closely and considered her words, but they did little to change his fixed expression.

He went on:

'Last night at 9:40, Gordon LaMonica received a telephone call from a panicking, terrified Joyce Holleran who managed to gasp, in great pain, that Nita Cochran was trying to kill her.'

'I don't believe it!'

'Believe it. A short, gasping cry at which time the phone

went dead. Mr LaMonica called here immediately and in less than ten minutes my men were at the scene. They found the telephone cord tangled in the dead woman's body, and torn from the wall. Obviously by her fall . . .'

Jessica's hand pressed against her lips. This was very bad news indeed, and it apparently gave her pause, although her mind was racing furiously to put the pieces of the mystery together.

'Mrs Fletcher,' Antonelli asked, 'do you know where your niece is hiding?'

'No, I do not.'

For reasons not fully clear to him, Antonelli believed she was telling the truth. 'If you do hear from her, you will cooperate and tell me . . .'

Jessica stiffened, her face tightening, telling Antonelli that if he were a betting man, he'd best bet on her protecting her niece, regardless of his requests.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

'We'll have to stop production for the day of the funeral,' Gordon LaMonica told Carol Needom.

'Can't count on too many of the cast being there,' she responded.

The morning after Joyce's murder, the *former* director and story editor of *Our Secret Lives*, scanned the tape of the show on a control booth monitor – *former* because, with Joyce's death, the network had swiftly moved them into new positions as producer and head writer, respectively.

Gordon gave the matter of the funeral some thought. 'Yes, well, as the new producer and new head writer *we'll* represent the show.'

'I suppose it's too early to talk over some ideas I have, she said, feeling no remorse – just concern about propriety.

'In a day or two,' Gordon LaMonica told her. 'But I've got to warn you, the network wants me to continue with what Joyce started.'

Carol frowned at that idea. 'Really?' How paranoid the 'grey suits' at the network were about any sort of unexpected change.

'With your touches added,' Gordon said to give her some reassurance. 'The ever-loving rating system says she was dead on track. No pun intended. Off with the old and on with the new. Except for dear old Julian Tenley and Todd. They stay.'

That figures, thought Carol. She knew Joyce had intended to keep both of them.

They both glanced at the monitor where the murder

scene was being replayed. There was Felix again, being shot by The Avenger, again, and holding his shoulder instead of his mid-section, again. How many times had they seen it now?

'What are you going to do about that?' Carol asked.

'We stick Felix in the hospital and get some mileage out of him teetering on the brink while Sybil sleeps with half the medical staff.'

Carol looked at him open-mouthed. He had to be kidding. But he wasn't, which meant she had to be serious.

'Martin's going to Hollywood,' she said. 'He's up for a lead in a new series.'

Gordon hit the 'freeze frame' button on the control board in front of them, holding the angle of The Avenger firing the automatic weapon. Suddenly his creative juices were flowing and he rambled on:

'So we edit out Felix getting hit. Shoot a close angle of The Avenger's gun firing. And have Sybil diddle with the homicide squad that comes to investigate the killing. And it's bye-bye Martin.'

Carol rolled her eyes heavenward. 'And bye-bye, Nita, wherever you are.'

Wherever she was, Nita was not at Sunnyvale. Jessica paid Agnes a visit just to be sure. Agnes was in her room, a large, pleasant chamber with a view of the nearby woods. She sat on her Queen Anne couch with Jessica, surrounded by antiques typical of a New England country inn. The room even had a fireplace with a marble mantle, upon which sat flowers, potpourri, mementoes, and pictures of Agnes' family.

Jessica found Agnes' mood to be astoundingly fiesty. Her fighting spirit seemed to have banished all the worries which weighed on Jessica's mind.

'Well, obviously Gordon LaMonica is lying about Joyce calling him,' she told Jessica. 'The question is, why? To cover his own guilt?'

Jessica was no less astounded by Agnes' quick recall of

names, and the role they played in the real-life murder. Knowing how much Agnes appreciated a complicated soap opera, Jessica explained:

'Lieutenant Antonelli said a squad car arrived at Gordon's apartment halfway across town, just about the same time one arrived at the Holleran's. The killer was seen at 9:35. The police got to both places less than ten minutes later.'

Agnes smacked the arm of the couch with the palm of her hand, exclaiming, 'Well, I don't care! Nita didn't do it. Not even if all the evidence says she did.' Suddenly Agnes seemed tired, as if the wind had been knocked out of her. Sadly, she was facing the facts confronting them. 'And evidence is all a jury is concerned with.' Her thoughts trailed off.

The phone rang and Jessica answered.

'Hello.' It was Nita. 'Hello,' she said. 'Who is this?'

Jessica was overjoyed. Agnes perked up. 'Nita?'

Yes, Nita it was. She was calling from a room in a cheap hotel in midtown Manhattan. The room was as dingy and depressing as her mood. There wasn't even a private phone and Nita had to resort to using the public pay phone in the dimly lit hallway.

'Aunt Jess?' she said, relieved to hear a friendly voice. 'I thought you'd gone back to Cabot Cove.'

'Where are you?' asked Jessica. 'Are you all right?'

'No, I'm scared stiff. How's Gram?'

Jessica glanced at Agnes, who was moving towards the phone so as to catch the conversation. 'Worried. Where are you?'

'The Maywood Hotel on Lexington,' Nita answered, her voice anxiety-ridden. 'Aunt Jess, I don't know what to do.'

'Stay there,' Jessica instructed her firmly. 'I'll be right over.'

'Room 36,' Nita told her.

'I'm on my way.' Agnes was already leaning in towards the earpiece to listen in on the conversation. 'I'll put your grandmother on.' As she handed the receiver over to Agnes,

Jessica advised her. 'Don't let her panic. Stay calm yourself.'

'Nita,' began Agnes loudly, getting on the line, 'how'd you get yourself in this mess?'

The Maywood Hotel qualified, without question, as a midtown flophouse. Not even the slightest effort to disguise the fact had been made by the management, whose regular patrons were vagrants and prostitutes. It was the sort of place where cheap sheer curtains blew out the windows in summer, and bums slept in the hall during winter. Most of the thousands of passersby on heavily trafficked Lexington never bothered to notice the building's bleak, sooty façade, or the neon sign which no longer lit.

However, today people were noticing. They were noticing two police cars and an unmarked official vehicle parked in front of the hotel's tattered awning. The swirling red lights drew attention to the scene. Even businessmen in this largely big business district broke from their brisk strides to take a look. Bag ladies and bankers alike were held back from getting closer to the entrance by two police officers.

This was the scene when Jessica arrived and stepped from her taxi onto the curb. Her heart was in her throat. She expected the worst. Having taken only a few steps towards the hotel entrance, she spotted two additional officers and Lieutenant Antonelli emerging from the lobby with Nita, handcuffed and forlorn. Poor Nita. Jessica moved swiftly towards her, but the police were swifter, pushing their prisoner into the back of a patrol car. Disheartened, frustrated, angry, Jessica watched as the car pulled away, leaving her standing amid the gawkers and the remaining policemen. She did manage to intercept Lieutenant Antonelli as he moved to his car.

'Lieutenant . . .' she called. He turned his head.

'Guess you forgot to call me,' he said sarcastically.

'Frankly, I didn't think about anything except getting to

my niece as soon as possible.' Too bad for Jessica and Nita, the cab ride from Sunnyvale took the better part of an hour.

Antonelli nodded. 'Figured something like that might happen. That's why we ordered up a few phone taps.' He began to open the door of his car. 'You'll excuse me.'

Jessica took a position on the opposite side of the car, facing him in a visual standoff. She addressed him straightforwardly:

'Lieutenant, we're both looking for the same thing. Cooperation is the only way . . .'

But his mind was made up.

'I've stopped looking,' he said, cocksure of himself. 'What are you doing?'

Without asking Antonelli's permission, Jessica was opening the passenger door of his car.

'Riding back to headquarters with you,' she answered, while the onlookers, the New York curious who never missed a good show, followed their discussion with keen interest. Antonelli knew she had him. He couldn't make a spectacle of himself, especially with such a determined woman whose perseverance was beginning to win his grudging respect.

'You may have stopped looking,' Jessica informed him in no uncertain terms. 'I haven't.'

'Mrs Fletcher . . .' he pleaded.

'You will arrange for me to see my niece, won't you?' she asked, stating it more as a demand than a request.

Exasperated, the lieutenant threw up his hands. 'Do I have a choice?'

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

'I'm sorry, Nita, but disappearing like that – it just wasn't very smart.'

Feeling somewhat awkward, Jessica gently reprimanded her niece for her erratic, irresponsible, irrational behaviour. Nita, who realised she'd acted foolishly, obviously regretted she'd caused everyone so much trouble. She also felt a high degree of embarrassment as she sat inside the visitor's room of the Twenty-First Precinct headquarters. It was hard to look Aunt Jess in the eye. She gazed down at the wooden table, scarred from years of wear and tear from nervous prisoners digging their fingernails into its surface, as she was presently doing.

When Nita found words to speak, she did so quietly to prevent the police matron, standing just out of earshot, from hearing.

'I know it wasn't smart,' she whispered across the table. 'What am I going to do?'

Aunt Jess was blunt and to the point. 'Start by telling me how you got into this mess.'

Nita stammered. 'It . . . it was . . . the delivery of those pages . . . I got so upset . . . I called you.'

'I returned your call at 9:30,' said Jessica. 'You weren't home.' Jessica didn't recall anything being said about any pages. 'What pages?' she inquired.

'Joyce had new script pages messengered for this morning's taping.' Jessica could see that as her niece talked about the situation she grew progressively angrier. 'The way they read I knew I was going to end up being The Avenger. She

knew what the job meant to me. She knew about Gram. I went to have it out with her.' Nita was gripped by her emotions. She began to tremble. Her stomach felt as though it were trying to leap out of her body. She was afraid she was going to hyperventilate as the panic took over. Jessica watched as her niece fought to keep control. 'I was so furious, I . . . I stood outside her apartment house, trying to get control of myself.'

Jessica remained the cool voice of reason. 'What time was that?'

'I don't know . . . a little before 9:30.'

'Go on,' Jessica told her.

'I guess it was only a couple of minutes when I saw somebody in my wardrobe – the Avenger wardrobe – coming out of the apartment building. He almost knocked two people down . . . I . . . I don't know why, but I felt a terrible premonition . . .'

'What did you do then?'

'I started to go inside,' Nita explained. 'I got as far as the elevator before I chickened out. I was going to call Joyce's apartment. I looked for a phone along the street.'

'And how long did all this take?' asked Jessica.

'Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. Then I heard the siren.'

This bit of information surprised Jessica. 'You saw the police arrive?'

Nita nodded in confirmation. 'And the ambulance. I knew then something awful had happened. I ran. I went back to my apartment. The police were *waiting* for me! I drove away; drove around half the night.'

'Why didn't you come to my hotel?'

'I was afraid they'd be watching there, too,' Nita explained. 'I panicked.'

A few minutes later, Jessica left the precinct headquarters and was heading down the steps. Lost in thought, she contemplated her next move, almost passing by Nita's fellow actors, Bibi Hartman and Herb Upton, without noticing. Herb seemed glad to see Jessica, giving her an

effusive, surprised 'hello.' Roused from her thoughts, Jessica was similarly surprised, and asked herself what they might be doing on the precinct steps at this hour. Herb was forthcoming with the answer:

'We'd heard Nita'd been arrested,' he said.

Bibi appeared to be sincerely concerned. 'Poor dear,' she said, taking Jessica by the hand in a somewhat dramatic gesture. 'How is she?'

Jessica had little time for theatrical displays of emotion. 'As you'd expect,' she said tersely. 'Very frightened.'

Rather awkwardly, Herb fumbled for words as he formed his next question to Jessica:

'I, uh, understand Joyce messengered some new pages to her.'

Almost imperceptively (except to Jessica's wary eye), Bibi revealed their true actors' colours, and possibly the purpose of their pilgrimage to the police station. Their exchange of darted looks indicated to Jessica they were here out of self-interest rather than for Nita's sake. A man not at ease with the situation, Herb continued:

'Did she . . . happen to mention what the changes were?'

They were not about to put anything over on Jessica – and she let them know it. Her tone was cool and taut. 'You mean the elimination of one or more characters.'

Jessica's ability to see through their selfish motives gave Herb pause to reflect on their not very noble actions.

'That makes us sound awfully . . .' he began hesitantly.

Cutting in, Bibi hoped to salvage some dignity in the situation. As far as she was concerned, they were perfectly justified in wanting to know their fates as well as Nita's. 'Yes, Mrs Fletcher, that *is* what we meant.'

'She didn't say,' Jessica said icily, and started to brush past them. 'Excuse me.'

Bibi stopped her with:

'Did she happen to say if Joyce had been working on the series bible.'

By 'bible' Jessica assumed they were not speaking of any holy books left on the set by Mr Gideon for the redemption

of actors' souls. Though similarly revered as a kind of holy book by those in the television world, 'bible' was the oft-used jargon word for the guidelines of a show – who the characters are, what style the series will take, the direction the plotlines will follow, and, in this case, who will remain in the cast of characters and who will – by a stroke of the writer's pen – die.

While Jessica normally took great pains to be gracious, she was in no mood to make the effort for the sake of this pair. Besides, the contents of the bible (Jessica loathed the use of the word that way) would have been unknown to Nita.

'She'd have no way of knowing, Miss Hartman,' Jessica told Bibi curtly. 'Nita was nowhere near that apartment.'

'Oh,' said Bibi. 'But Gordon said Joyce accused Nita with her dying breath. I naturally assumed . . .'

'You assumed incorrectly. Someone else – wearing her costume – killed Joyce Holleran.'

Meeting their eyes, Jessica spoke with such strong conviction and authority that it scared Bibi. The ring of accusation in her voice was unmistakable.

Flustered, Bibi began, 'If you're suggesting . . .'

'I'm not suggesting. I'm stating it as clearly as I know how.'

Allies of sorts – or, at the very least, bedfellows under the same eye of suspicion – Herbert and Bibi exchanged troubled glances. Herb's confidence seemed to have fled him entirely; so much so, that he had to clear his throat before he could even get the words out:

'Well, uh, lucky for me I was directing that Little Theatre group in the Village when it happened.'

And Bibi had an alibi of her own, which she quickly made known to Jessica:

'Yes, and I . . . uh . . . I was driving . . . alone . . . out to the Island . . . to see my sister . . . only to find she wasn't home. I can't prove that, of course.'

Jessica almost smiled at the way they were both so threatened by her formidable presence. Sometimes a reputation

as a mystery writer made people believe you could detect their guilt.

'That's something you'll have to take up with Lieutenant Antonelli,' Jessica said, making another effort to get on her way.

Bibi was not about to let her go. Jessica turned around at the sound of her voice as she stated:

'Mrs Fletcher, believe what you wish, but I like Nita very much. We all do. But also believe this. There isn't one of us who's sorry Joyce Holleran is dead. Whoever killed her did us all one great, big favour.'

However true that may have been, Jessica thought Bibi a foolish woman to be so brash as to state her convictions openly on the steps of police precinct headquarters. But actors, she was beginning to learn, often behaved like children. She shook her head and was on her way.

They would all soon find out that murder was anything but child's play.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The late Joyce Holleran's ghost hovered over the sound stage of *Our Secret Lives* as the cast readied another of her scenes for shooting. This one took place on the permanent hospital set, behind that of Felix's library. Prop men moved a gurney into the hallway. A cameraman's assistant took a reading of the hospital corridor with his light meter. A grip moved a false wall into place.

Julian, in his physician's white coat and glasses, walked through the hallway of the set towards the nurses' station, where he paused. His expression was troubled, like that of a man with a gravely ill patient.

Nearby, Gordon was giving instructions to his head cameraman. After deliberating whether or not to interrupt, Julian stepped up to the director, who was struck by his anxious frown.

'Gordon, could I see you?' Julian asked.

'Good morning, Julian,' Gordon said, with a hint of reluctance to talk.

'Yes.' Julian was not taking the hint. 'Gordon, I'd like to talk to you about my scene with Nita where she confesses she's The Avenger.'

'We're pushing that whole story line ahead indefinitely, Julian,' the director-producer told him. 'Carol will have new pages for you.'

Gordon's answer failed to satisfy Julian. He was going to press the issue. Julian persisted, saying:

'When the police release Nita on that asinine charge of

murder, I'd like the scene rewritten so that she's not the killer.'

Gordon was becoming noticeably restless and reticent to discuss the matter.

'A rewrite might be a moot issue,' he told Julian. 'In any case, my orders are to keep the changes Joyce started.'

Julian intended to take a stand. 'Gordon, it isn't often I ask your indulgence . . . however . . .'

'Julian, I'm sorry,' the director replied, shaking his head impatiently. 'I can't take the time right now.'

'All right,' said Julian, disappointed and backing off. 'We'll talk later.'

Nodding perfunctorily, Julian took leave of Gordon. Behind one of the flats, he ran into actor Martin Grattop, better known as 'Felix' to his loyal public. Having been killed on the show only a few days before, Martin was trying to make a return to the soap opera. Hardly anyone had noticed his brief absence.

'Good morning, Martin,' Julian greeted.

'Julian. I'm back,' Martin said jovially.

Julian didn't quite comprehend. 'Back?'

'That Hollywood series fell through before I got my bags packed,' Martin explained good-humouredly. 'Have you seen Gordon?'

Julian pointed behind him. 'He's on the hospital set.'

'I've got a great idea how Felix can be kept alive. I want to tell him about it.'

Julian was sombre, and sounded not very optimistic. 'I wish you luck,' he said sincerely. 'I really do. Sad to say Joyce's influence still hangs over things like a shroud.'

Acting as if a cloud of doom hung over his own head like the sword of Damacles, Julian absent-mindedly walked off without another word. Maybe this business of resurrecting his character wasn't going to be as easy as he'd anticipated, Martin thought to himself. Regardless, he would take his chances with Gordon. Now that Gordon was the producer as well as director, perhaps he had the clout to reshape the show as he saw fit.

*

Outside his apartment building, Larry Holleran, looking better for a shave, a bath, and some rest, accepted his doorman's condolences and made a vain attempt to hail a passing cab. He'd fare better if he walked to the end of his quiet street and got one at the corner. Just as he was about to go, he glimpsed a cab coming down his street, its 'for hire' light on. Maybe, thought Larry Holleran, his luck was beginning to turn.

Oddly, the woman who opened the door appeared to be staying. She had a familiar look about her. But Larry Holleran didn't recognize Jessica from their one meeting.

'Mr Holleran,' she said, smiling up at him from the back seat of the cab. He waited for her to get out and allow him in. It was soon clear that she wasn't leaving.

'Yes?'

'We met at the studio. My name is Jessica Fletcher. Nita Cochran's aunt.'

Suddenly he was hesitant. 'Oh, yes.'

'Could we talk?' she asked straight out. 'I was hoping you might help me clear up something that has me a bit confused.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, somewhat on edge. 'I'm on my way to my lawyers.'

Jessica sighed. She couldn't beat around the bush any longer.

'It's about your telling the police you left the apartment building at 9:30 last night.' Uneasy, he looked at her quizzically. 'Which I'm afraid you didn't – not unless you were dressed as The Avenger.' Giving that time to sink in, she paused, then invited him into the cab. 'Maybe I could drop you. We could talk on the way.'

Though reluctant, Larry Holleran thought, in light of her assumption, he'd better take her up on her offer. The cabbie jerked his taxi from its standing position and sped down the sidestreet, barely braking as he made the turn and jockeyed for position in the fast-moving flow of traffic on the avenue.

'I suppose you can prove that preposterous accusation,' Larry said to Jessica.

'If I have to,' she responded. Turning away from her glance, he looked out the window. She continued: 'I've uncovered a witness who was outside the apartment – a witness who saw The Avenger leave and a short time later the police arrive, but who never saw you exit the building.'

Jessica watched as her explanation prompted him to bite his thumbnail.

'I was with Bibi Hartman until 3:00 this morning.' Jessica's questioning look told him she had her doubts. He hastily elaborated. 'A friend of mine has an apartment in our building. He travels a lot; lets me use it when Bibi and I want to be together. It's obvious why I didn't tell the police.'

'She'll verify this?' Jessica queried.

'If I ask her to.'

Jessica voiced her suspicious thoughts. 'Giving you both an alibi.'

'Alibi?' he said, his vocal chords nearly cracking under pressure. 'You think I killed Joyce? Why? She was my meal ticket. I never had it so good. I had no reason.'

Jessica seemed to think otherwise. And she told him why:

'Not even ownership of *Our Secret Lives* which I understand could be worth several million dollars.'

'Good point,' he allowed. 'But the killer took the bible. If I'd killed her, I'd have left it behind and protected those several millions in royalties.'

Jessica countered, saying:

'Unless you wanted to divert suspicion. She must have told you she'd discussed her ideas in detail with the network and Gordon LaMonica and Carol Needom.'

Larry rose to the bait. 'Yeah,' he conceded. 'Okay. So she mentioned there'd been a few conferences. Look, those so-called millions in profits – those are a long way down the road.' His crooked grin was lost on Jessica. 'I'm sorry, Mrs Fletcher, but you've got the wrong guy. I'll tell you

one thing, though. I was a damned fool for not telling the cops the truth – about me and Bibi – a mistake I plan to rectify before *you* get the chance.' And with that, he leaned forward to speak through the glass partition. 'Cabbie, Manhattan police precinct headquarters.'

A smug look on his face, he looked at Jessica and settled back into the seat while the cabbie asked, in broken English, exactly where precinct headquarters were.

CHAPTER THIRTY

When Todd Worthy strolled down the studio corridor to have a talk with Carol about his role in the show, he found her office closed. He knew that she'd taken over Joyce's job; he didn't know she'd taken over her office as well. It was a big leap for Carol from the windowless room where she'd been pigeonholed to the spacious office that looked out onto chic Columbus Avenue. From the corner of the office, she even a postage-stamp glimse of Central Park.

But Carol didn't have much time to admire the lush greenery of the park. She was busy at the long Parson's table which had served as Joyce's centre of operations and was now hers. It seemed odd to her, this overnight success – going so suddenly from feeling like a nobody, then waking up one morning to be told you'd become the queen of the realm. Joyce's secretary took care of all her needs, screened her calls, announced visitors, and guarded her from the outside world. While Carol enjoyed the freedom from interruption, the privacy, and the space, she wasn't comfortable with the sense of isolation, and wondered if perhaps that hadn't contributed to Joyce's aloofness.

Trying to catch up with her heavy work load, Carol had instructed her secretary to hold all calls. It was another matter when the secretary buzzed that Todd Worthy was here to see her. Todd's face made for better scenery than the view out her window. She had to admit to herself that she hadn't gotten over her crush on him. Never fall in love with an actor, she chided herself – a cardinal rule of

preservation in this business. They were heartbreakers whose egos were like a wrecking ball to the fragile romantic.

Against her better judgment, Carol couldn't resist seeing Todd, and wasn't proud of the fact that, in a position of power over him, she could manipulate him as she wished.

'C'mon, Carol' he pleaded with her. 'You're the one person in this lousy company I thought I could count on – and you're saying there's nothing you can do?'

'I'm sorry, Todd,' she said, playing hard to get while striving to give the impression she was on his side. 'Gordon's giving the orders now and he says you and Julian stay on the show – just like Joyce planned.'

Todd paced back and forth. Stopping by the window, he looked out of the people swarming like lemmings into the boutiques and pavement cafés outside.

'Great!' he said facetiously, whirling around at her. 'First that broad, now Gordon. Well, one way or another, I'm getting off this damned programme.' Striding across her office to the door, he opened it angrily and turned around to face her. 'I really thought you were on my side, Carol.'

She had second thoughts about her decision as she looked into his clear blue eyes. But before she could reconsider, he was gone, stalking past Jessica who was waiting in the outer office.

Jessica peered into the open doorway. Caught off guard, Carol was suddenly tense, and a little embarrassed. Jessica smiled apologetically as she stepped into the office.

'Sorry, did I interrupt something personal?'

'I only wish,' Carol huffed.

'I gather from Mr Worthy's expression that his freedom won't be forthcoming.'

'That's one way of putting it,' said Carol, rising from her desk. Now *she* was pacing.

'What a bizarre situation,' Jessica observed. 'Those who want out can't leave. Those who want to stay are being dropped.' Remembering that she had forgotten to introduce herself, she began, 'Oh, by the way, my name is . . .'

'I know who you are, Mrs Fletcher, and I can guess why

you're here. Looking for somebody to give to the police in exchange for your niece.' Jessica was somewhat taken aback by the unfriendly tone of Carol's voice. She only hoped that, now that Carol was the head writer, she had not assumed Joyce's disposition along with the job.

'No, not just somebody,' said Jessica in response to her question.

With more than a trace of defiance, Carol exploded:

'Look – Joyce is dead and all of a sudden I'm the head writer with a big office and an even bigger salary. If that's motive, I plead guilty. But I didn't kill her. Success isn't all that great that I have to climb over somebody's bones to get there.'

Carol was taking this much more personally than Jessica had intended.

'I came only to ask you a simple question, Miss Needom,' Jessica told her, smiling. 'Did Mrs Holleran discuss with you the changes she intended to make?'

'With *me*?' Carol laughed derisively. 'You must be kidding.'

'The network, then.'

'Oh, she never consulted with *them*.'

Thinking to herself, Jessica spoke aloud, not realizing she was mumbling loud enough for Carol to hear. 'Then it must have been Gordon LaMonica.'

'What?'

'Nothing,' Jessica said. 'Thanks very much. You've been very helpful.'

Leaving Carol to wonder what she meant by her last statement, Jessica hurried out the door.

Outside in the corridor, Jessica encountered Herbert Upton, who appeared to be heading towards Carol Needom's office. On recognizing Jessica, he did an about-face and hurried down the hall to overtake her.

'Mrs Fletcher!' He could tell she was not especially pleased to see him. 'I owe you an apology for my behaviour at the police station.'

'It really isn't necessary.'

'But it is,' he insisted. 'You see, I've been playing Inspector Holcomb for over ten years. I'm so identified with the role, I'd never get any other decent work.'

It occurred to Jessica that actors had the most peculiar employment problems.

Escorting Jessica towards the door to the television stage, Herbert Upton continued to speak at a breathless pace:

'It was very crass of Bibi and me to be thinking of ourselves. I apologize.'

'Accepted,' she said.

'Despite what Gordon claims were Joyce's last words, I just can't believe Nita killed her.'

'Neither can I.'

'Would you be interested in a theory from Lieutenant Holcolm?' Jessica gave him a cursory nod, and he offered his assessment of the situation. 'A love triangle? Larry, Bibi, and Joyce?'

Not at all taken with his amateur sleuthing, Jessica frowned, indicating her doubt. Odd how actors so believed they were the characters they played and felt qualified to make professional judgments.

Herbert Upton offered his credentials:

'I've solved five cases on the show. In four of them the other woman was the killer.'

Though that was a highly dubious prospect, Jessica could leave no stone unturned. 'You think Bibi wore Nita's Avenger wardrobe?' she inquired.

'Yep.'

She peered at him intently, wrinkling her forehead.

'Why?'

'To point thee finger of suspicion.'

Proud of himself, Herbert Upton, like a gallant gentleman and a super-sleuth who had just solved the case, stopped at the heavy stage door and opened it with a flourish.

Jessica found it not altogether difficult to take the wind out of his sails.

'But she couldn't have known Joyce would live long enough to name Nita as her killer,' she said.

Stunned, Herbert held the door for her. He couldn't believe she had so easily discredited his theory. 'Huh?' As it dawned on him that she was right, he thoughtlessly remarked, 'So maybe it was Nita,' which provoked a grimace from Jessica.

She was poised to strike back with a retort when Julian appeared in the open door, with a warmly avuncular:

'Well, hello there.'

'Hello, Julian,' Jessica said.

Julian flashed her a broad smile. 'Just the person I wanted to see.'

'Oh?' she asked curiously.

'You tell that niece of ours that everything is going to be all right.' While she hoped such was the case, she'd rather Julian not refer to Nita as 'our' niece. This little family business was going too far. She listened carefully as Julian continued. 'I've talked to Warren Finsterwald. He's Pittsfield's leading attorney. And I believe he's going to take her case.'

Julian smiled, a little dodderingly, Jessica thought; but he meant well. Jessica paused. At first she thought he had been teasing – all the references to 'our' niece and his offering medical opinions as though he were a doctor. Could he actually believe he really was a doctor? that Nita was his niece? and that he was living in Pittsfield? A case of delusion, perhaps, and coupled with senility. Observing Julian as he ambled off to strike up another conversation, Jessica turned to Herbert Upton for his reaction. He merely shrugged helplessly and shook his head, as if to say, 'Poor old man.'

It took Jessica a while to catch Gordon LaMonica in a free moment that would allow them to speak privately. Finally, she managed to corner him inside the control booth, away from the hustle and bustle of activity on the set.

The director-producer was hardly empathetic. 'As far as

I'm concerned,' he told Jessica, 'the police have Joyce's killer in custody.'

'And as far as I'm concerned, there are several other possibilities.'

'I know,' he said flatly. 'Carol just called me. Said you mentioned my name.'

So that's why Gordon was being so cool towards her, Jessica thought. 'Because I believe Joyce Holleran discussed with you the changes she had in mind for the programme,' she explained.

'That's right,' he admitted, nervously checking his watch. She couldn't tell if he was uncomfortable with her inquiries, or whether he was anxious to get on with the next scene. 'Look . . .'

'I'd like to discuss the changes in detail. I'm sure . . .'

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. 'Look, Mrs Fletcher, I haven't got time to humour you right now. I've got a show to put together.'

Jessica shot him a steely glance. 'I'll be sure to tell Nita of your concern.'

Her unexpected comment brought him up short. 'Okay, okay,' he sighed, relenting. 'Look, it'll be a long day, but suppose I meet you tonight – at 8:00 – Barney's Tavern on 49th Street. It's one of our hangouts. I'll fill you in.'

'I'll find it,' Jessica assured him, and left him to contemplate the next scene.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

'NITA COCHRAN DIDN'T KILL JOYCE HOLLERAN. I DID. AND IT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE SHOW. CATCH ME IF YOU CAN.'

Sergeant Kaplan pondered the note Lieutenant Antonelli had received in the morning mail. It had the look of something a kid would do as a prank. Pasted onto a sheet of paper were printed letters, each of them separately cut from magazines and attached at odd angles to spell out the message. Kaplan didn't know whether Antonelli would take it seriously, but if it were up to him, well, *he* couldn't dismiss it categorically.

The lieutenant laughed at the note. This case was getting more bizarre by the minute. Kaplan was afraid that his boss would crumple the thing up and throw it away. But even Antonelli wasn't so arrogant that he could take the chance he'd be disposing of evidence.

'Take it and the envelope it came in down to Forensic,' he ordered him. 'See what they can pull.'

'You think it's anything?' Sergeant Kaplan asked.

'Yeah,' said Antonelli, with mock seriousness. 'I think it's right out of a soap opera. Or a two-bit detective novel.' Not wanting to discuss it further, he waved Sergeant Kaplan away. 'Get going.'

Barney's Tavern, on the edge of New York's theatre district, was a lively show business watering hole off Ninth Avenue. Its location and atmosphere catered to theatre folk, those who aspired to be theatre folk, or those who liked

mingling with them. Long and dark, the tavern had a heavy wooden bar which ran most of its length. The subterranean room, already claustrophobic by virtue of its narrow length and low ceilings, was divided in half by a brick wall down the middle. Arched openings in the wall allowed for patrons on one side of the tavern to eye those on the other. With brick walls, a hardwood floor, and no drapes or carpeting to be found, the tavern had the din of a European train station. Ironically, the noise seemed to be condusive to intimate conversations, since many of the drinkers and diners in the establishment were animatedly engaged in *tête à têtes* over their small tables. If the look of the crowd wasn't clue enough that this was a show business hangout, the collection of theatre posters – most of them in memorium to failed Broadway shows – prominently announced the fact.

Jessica stepped inside and looked over the crowd for a sign of Gordon LaMonica. After her eyes adjusted to the darkness, they still could not make out his face anywhere in the crowd. But a woman, sitting alone in a booth, was familiar. A drink in hand, and the remains of others in empty glasses in front of her, Bibi Hartman had obviously had a few. She caught sight of Jessica and scowled, none too happy to see her. Nevertheless, she slid out of the booth and moved unsteadily towards her. As Bibi steadied herself, breaking a near fall by placing one hand on the back of a stranger's chair, she applauded Jessica with a flair of theatricality.

'Author. Author. Author,' she called to Jessica.

Bibi's tipsy state was fully apparent to Jessica. 'Good evening, Bibi.'

'"Good evening, Bibi,"' she parroted, snidely. 'Do you know where I was for half the afternoon?'

'No, I'm afraid I don't.'

Jessica slipped into an empty booth. That didn't stop Bibi from leaning towards her, and for a moment Jessica believed Bibi intended to join her.

'Chatting with that absolutely delightful Lieutenant

Antonelli and trying to persuade him – with some success, I might add – that while Larry's late and unlamented wife was being terminated by your niece, Larry and I were warming the sheets in the apartment four stories below. Specifically from 9:30 to around 3:00 a.m. And I swore to it.' Then Bibi checked her watch. 'Matter of fact,' she continued, 'we're playing an encore tonight, if he ever shows up.'

A waiter raced by. Jessica tried to catch his eye, to no avail.

'I suppose you're relieved, now that your relationship no longer has to be kept hidden.'

'Right,' said Bibi, slugging back her Scotch.

Jessica glanced at her own watch and scanned the crowd gathered around the door.

'I don't suppose you happened to see Gordon LaMonica?' she asked Bibi.

'Gordy?' she said, slurring his name. 'Sure, we just had a drink together. Say, you don't think *he* and *I*...'

Losing patience with Bibi, Jessica cut her off. 'He said he'd meet me here at 8:00.'

'Well, you're out of luck, author. He got a call from the studio, something about more "actor trouble."' As she said the last two words, emphasizing them, she arched her eyebrows meaningfully. A weird, sly grin came over Bibi's face. Jessica couldn't quite get a reading on it. 'You know, you've got a way about you,' Bibi rattled on. 'You and Gordon – that's really interesting, ya know that?'

But Jessica had lost interest, barely hearing Bibi's insinuation. A thought had occurred to her, one which might solve this complicated affair. Pushing the table away from her, she rose suddenly from the booth and hurried from the tavern. Bewildered as she watched Jessica go out the door, Bibi stared at the bottom of her glass. It was empty. She caught the eye of the passing waiter, a young actor who knew her habits, and smiled; without a word between them, he headed for the bar to get her another.

*

By the time Jessica left the tavern, Gordon LaMonica was across town, otherwise engaged at the studio.

Inside the television studio building which housed the sound stage of *Our Secret Lives*, there was an eerie stillness. The television stage was dark, save for the glow of a single work light, which barely illuminated the soap opera sets and control room. There were no night watchmen roaming the stage, no custodians sweeping up, no technicians working on the set. Just Gordon LaMonica.

Carefully stepping over the cables and between the flats, he called into the darkness:

'Todd, where are you?'

No answer was forthcoming. Moving through the shadows towards the study set, Gordon continued to call Todd's name without receiving any reply. Then, from a darkened corner near the set, came muffled voices. Tentatively, Gordon moved towards them.

He couldn't make out the cassette tape recorder which was the source of the voices. But they distinctly belonged to Herb, Bibi, Martin, Todd and Julian. Their discussion, a typical actors' 'bull session,' was intense and gossipy. Gordon strained to listen as he edged closer to the recorder. The set came into view, its wood panelled walls and bookshelves dim and gloomy in the faint glow of the overhanging work light.

The first voice he could make out clearly belonged to Todd:

'Don't tell *me* he's following the network's orders,' he said angrily.

'Absolutely,' came Herb's voice next. 'He could do something if he wanted.'

Then Julian entered the fray with: 'I can't believe Gordon would turn his back on us.'

'Julian, he's not the friend you want him to be,' argued Herb. 'He's looking out for number one.'

Bibi predicted pessimistically, 'Let's face it. We're doomed to extinction.'

Martin voiced his opinion of the developing situation:

'It's exactly the same for us as if nothing happened to Joyce.'

Of all the participants, it was Todd who was the most vehement and damning:

'I say if he doesn't come around we somehow find a way to get rid of him.'

Gordon stood over the tape recorder and testily jabbed at the 'stop' button with his index finger, silencing the tape. So they were plotting behind his back to get rid of him, he thought. Well, he would show them. Joyce had mastered the art of 'playing God,' and he would follow in her footsteps if they didn't . . . He started at the sound of a sudden noise from somewhere behind him and whirled around.

'Todd . . . !'

Standing before him in the nearby shadows was The Avenger – or at least what appeared to be The Avenger. Gordon couldn't be sure. Whoever or whatever it was caused his eyes to go wide in horror. In the dim shaft of light, Gordon could see the outlines of the intruder's hand and the.38 revolver it held, pointing towards him.

Outside in the studio corridor, brightly lit with fluorescents in stark contrast to the dark sound stage, Jessica stepped through the building entrance. She was promptly confronted by the security guard, a uniformed black man whose responsibility it was to keep track of people entering and leaving the network offices after regular hours.

'Sorry, ma'am,' the guard informed Jessica, 'no one's permitted in without proper authorization.'

'Yes, I understand,' she said hastily. 'Just tell me if you've seen Mr LaMonica?'

'Ma'am, I haven't seen anybody. They've all gone home. The place is empty except for you an' . . .'

A muffled shot from inside the sound stage cut him off. Reacting to the noise, the guard raced towards the door, with Jessica closely on his heels.

Light from the corridor cast a bright beam across the floor of the stage as the guard threw open the massive door. Except for the sound of the door slamming against the wall,

there was silence. Standing together, Jessica and the guard looked about for any sign of movement. Then they glimpsed the shadowy blur of The Avenger. Skittering across the swatch of light, he disappeared through a rear exit.

Jessica and the security guard raced forward towards the study set, leaping over cables as they went. They stopped in their tracks at the sight of a man who stepped into view before them, as if out of nowhere.

The appearance of Gordon LaMonica, looking white as a ghost, evoked a gasp from Jessica. Zombie-like, he stood in the very same spot where, only a few days before, the character of Felix was shot. And now, Gordon, too, had been shot. Blood oozed between his fingers where they clutched his shoulder.

Upon seeing the badly wounded Gordon, the guard instinctively ran after The Avenger in the faint hope of cornering him.

In a state of shock, Gordon stared blankly into Jessica's eyes, then sank to his knees and collapsed at her feet. She knelt down to him, reached for his hand, and felt a weak pulse.

Gordon LaMonica was not dead – at least, not yet.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The emergency room of an East Side hospital admitted Gordon LaMonica for treatment of his gunshot wound. Before leaving the studio, Jessica had contacted Lieutenant Antonelli. Upon their discovery of the tape recorder containing the actor's 'bull session,' the police rounded up Todd Worthy for questioning.

The bullet was quickly removed from Gordon LaMonica's shoulder. He spent the night resting comfortably in his private hospital room.

By the following morning, Gordon had recovered enough to entertain visitors. Jessica, Lieutenant Antonelli, and Todd Worthy gathered in his room. Gordon adjusted the bed so he could sit up without putting pressure on his bandaged shoulder. Todd fidgeted nervously. He was plainly scared, behaving like a desperate man. Antonelli was treating him as if he were guilty of firing the shot which wounded Gordon. Despite the flower arrangements sent to Gordon from well-wishing cast members, a sombre mood prevailed in the sunny room.

Guilty or not, Todd felt condemned by the evidence of the tape; confronting Gordon called for more emotional strength then he had at the moment. As Jessica heard him out, she listened and watched carefully to determine if he was genuine or giving yet another performance.

'Yes, I said we'd have to do something to get rid of him,' Todd told the gathering, 'but I didn't mean murder.' He looked at Gordon plaintively. 'Gordon, you know that.'

Gordon's face remained impassive. 'All I know is, I got

a message from my service saying you weren't going to show for tomorrow's taping unless I met you at the studio.'

'I didn't make that call,' Todd said. 'I told you!' He turned to Antonelli for understanding. 'Lieutenant, I was at my apartment before 7:00 o'clock last night, until your people came. I was out of breath when they got there because . . .'

Antonelli had heard all this before, and wasn't any more convinced of its veracity now. He countered with:

'I know, I know, because you'd been exercising for over half an hour, *and* you were home alone because you felt like being alone, *and* you didn't make the call to LaMonica's answering service, *and* you didn't try to kill him even though you *did* say you somehow had to get rid of him.'

Although Jessica was somewhat relieved that the suspicion cast on Todd helped Nita's cause, she was not so greatly influenced by the evidence against him as was Lieutenant Antonelli.

'Lieutenant, don't you think if he had wanted to kill Mr LaMonica, he would have done it?' she asked.

'Mrs Fletcher,' he replied, pointing to Gordon in his bed, 'the man has a bullet slug in his shoulder.'

'In his *shoulder,*' she said. 'My very point. The way I understand it, the attacker was much too close to miss if he'd wanted to kill – and he certainly had ample time for a second or third shot.'

Antonelli considered the possibility, though he wasn't conceding anything yet. 'Yeah, maybe . . .'

'It would have been a *warning* to Mr LaMonica not to tamper with the show,' Jessica suggested. 'Supposing somebody secretly taped that actors' bull session . . . then with Todd making what sounded like a threat, used his name to lure Mr LaMonica to the studio.'

Todd, who had been brooding, his head buried in hands, found reason for hope in Jessica's argument and looked up to see the policeman's reaction.

'That makes as much sense as that ridiculous confession note I got,' he said, dashing Todd's hopes.

Just then the phone rang. Gordon picked it up. The call was for Antonelli.

'Lieutenant,' Gordon said, holding out the phone. Antonelli took it.

'Antonelli . . . Yeah, Kaplan.' Jessica tuned in to his conversation in an effort to glean anything she could from the lieutenant's conversation with Sergeant Kaplan. Antonelli reacted to something, though she didn't have a clue as to what it was. Then with a terse 'thanks' to Kaplan, he hung up the phone and addressed Gordon LaMonica:

'That.38 slug they took from your shoulder . . .' he explained, 'it matches the one that killed Joyce Holleran.'

Startled, Jessica was suddenly keenly interested in this new bit of information.

'Joyce Holleran was killed with a.38?' she asked excitedly. This was news to her. 'But I thought . . .' If that were the so, it could make a big difference in the solving of the murder. 'In that publicity still, The Avenger held a.45 automatic,' she pointed out.

'I know,' said Antonelli, not impressed one way or the other by Jessica's observation.

'The killer wore The Avenger's clothes,' she continued. 'I assumed whoever it was used the.45.'

'Sorry about that,' said Antonelli. 'It was a.38 police special.'

'My goodness,' allowed Jessica, 'that certainly changes things.' Taken by surprise by her remark, Antonelli wondered what she meant by it. When she asked, 'Lieutenant, will you come to the studio with me?', he nodded in agreement, curious to find out what this revelation was and how she had come to arrive at it.

The prop man, an old timer who had worked in the New York theatre long before his move to television during its 'golden years' in the '50's, led Jessica and Lieutenant Antonelli to the prop box.

He swung it open, disclosing several drawers, then reached the one in which they were most interested: the

weapons drawer. In it was an assortment of hand guns, slips of paper tied around them to denote which of the cast members used them in the show. Among the guns was a.45 automatic which lay next to a magazine clip filled with blanks. The paper slip on the gun indicated it belonged to The Avenger. Resting beside that of The Avenger, was the holster to another gun, the gun itself having been removed, leaving only the empty holster and a slip of paper which read: Lt. Holcomb. The prop man reached for the.45 automatic along with the magazine clip of blanks and handed it to Jessica.

'The Avenger's.45,' he demonstrated, 'cleaned and oiled, and its clip of blanks.'

Taking it in hand, she raised it to her nose and sniffed the barrel. Seeing the empty holster in the drawer, she inquired, 'Where is the gun that belongs in that?'

The prop man searched the drawer and wrinkled his brow in puzzlement. 'I don't know,' he told her. 'Should be right there.'

Jessica turned over the.45 to Antonelli, who similarly sniffed the barrel while she thumbed the blanks from the magazine clip.

'When was this cleaned?' Antonelli asked the prop man.

'Right after The Avenger/Felix sequence. Where Martin Grattop got mad about his character being killed off.'

'Someone's used it since,' said Jessica.

'No way,' replied the prop man. 'None o' them guns gets taken unless I hand it out.'

His response prompted Jessica to observe, 'This is a seven-shot clip.' She showed the detective. The prop man looked on curiously. 'There are only six here.' Her next question to the prop man caught him by surprise, further dumbfounding him. 'That missing gun Herbert Upton uses to play Inspector Holcomb: what kind is it?'

The prop man answered, 'A.38 police special.' Shaking his head in consternation, he added, 'I sure don't understand how it got taken without my . . .'

Jessica darted a look to Antonelli to see if he was catching on yet.

'You think Upton's pistol is the murder weapon?' he asked her.

'Possibly,' she said, without jumping to any definite conclusions. 'Or it was taken to make it seem as if it could be.'

Antonelli knew she was right, and that he was losing ground to her arguments and presentation of the evidence. He had to give the woman credit: she was much smarter than he thought. Very few people had ever been able to shake his conviction in an apparently air-tight case such as this one.

'LaMonica's shooting was made to look like it was a murder attempt,' he stated. Jessica nodded. 'Upton's missing.38 is made to look like it's the gun that killed Joyce Holleran . . .' Again, she nodded.

As confused as Lieutenant Antonelli was, he was made all the more so when Jessica matter-of-factly added:

'Pieces are beginning to fit, Lieutenant, but a few are still missing.'

He addressed her with a tone of respect at last. 'Look, if you're on to something . . .'

'I think I am,' she told him. 'I'll know after a little checking.'

Antonelli admired her tenacity. She'd also taught him a thing or two about keeping an open mind. Suddenly, he had a hunch she was going to help him crack this case.

'Thank you for your help,' she said to the prop man. Then she moved off, taking Antonelli's arm. 'If I'm right, we'll have to ask Mr LaMonica to help us with some arrangements.'

Lieutenant Antonelli appeared willing to follow her lead. The lady acted on her instincts. However, he could see by now that her mind was always racing, making astute deductions which complimented her intuition. Whatever puzzle she was presently putting together, he still felt very much in the dark.

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That afternoon, a small crowd of tourists armed with autograph books waited outside the studio entrance in hopes of catching their favourite daytime television stars. But all they caught was a fleeting glimpse of Jessica Fletcher and Carol Needom hurrying past on their way to the sound stage.

Jessica seemed oblivious to the presence of the gathering of soap opera fans. As she focused on presenting to Carol the intricate building blocks of her risky plan, the words tumbled out of her mouth. Carol, like a student intimidated by a distinguished professor, listened intently. A few moments in the presence of Jessica's storytelling genius, and Carol was awed. The scenerio Jessica proposed was brilliant. But it wasn't until Jessica concluded her proposal that Carol was truly astounded, for Jessica was inviting her, former soap opera story editor, to participate in a young writer's dream.

'Me, collaborate with Jessica Fletcher?' she asked incredulously. 'I'd love it.'

The sound stage was empty. Shooting on *Our Secret Lives* – suspended because of Joyce Holleran's death – wouldn't resume till tomorrow. With Carol as her guide, Jessica surveyed the set where they would be staging the action for their denouement. They would have to complete the script in one day. Fine by Carol; she was used to the pressure. And working with Jessica would be heaven. Jessica, who was already somewhat acquainted with the basic mechanics of television production by now, examined the teleprompters.

'How long will it take to get our dialogue cued into the teleprompters?' she asked Carol.

'No time at all,' Carol told her.

'Well,' Jessica said, rubbing her palms together as if warming them up, 'let's get to work.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Thunder clapped and lightning flashed, illuminating the tree branches outside the French doors. The rain beat down on the windowpanes.

Outside the elegant study, the storm raged through the blackness of night; inside, a warm, yellow glow from the fireplace filled the room.

Todd Worthy, playing his character of Gil, leaned against the white marble mantle. He glowered with all the suppressed brooding passion of Heathcliff on the moors. Bibi Hartman, portraying the seductress Sybil, stood restlessly behind the nearby wing chair.

'Come on, Sybil,' he said. 'Felix hasn't been dead two days, and you want . . .'

'I've wanted you from the first day I saw you, Gil,' she told him. 'And you want me.'

On the other side of the stage line, the camera crew shot the scene, capturing Todd and Bibi from various angles. All the while, the teleprompters rolled the dialogue. Not having seen the script for the day's shooting, they had no choice but to read their lines as they appeared on the teleprompter's screen. As Todd and Bibi were quickly learning, it was no easy job for an actor to create a spontaneous performance from unfamiliar lines.

Todd scanned the teleprompter, then said:

'Things are different now with Courtney in the picture.'

While Todd read his line, Bibi was learning hers:

'Courtney. After all the real women you've known, what can that simpering child offer you?'

Reading his line, Todd replied:

'It's all the "real women" I've known that makes her all the more dear to me.'

Inside the control room above the stage floor, Gordon LaMonica, his arm in a sling, gave camera directions via a microphone which transmitted them to the cameramen's earphones. Sitting alongside him, Jessica watched and listened to the dialogue – written hurriedly by Carol and her – being performed by the two actors. As part of an audience that had assembled behind the glass partition to observe the resumption of shooting, she glanced both at the stage below as well as the monitors. The other audience members included Lieutenant Antonelli, Larry Holleran, Martin Grattop, and Herbert Upton. The tension in the booth was palpable. Only Jessica and Carol knew where the scene was going; the others held their breath, anticipating something momentous about to occur on the set.

They all watched closely as, in the study below, Bibi moved around the side of the chair to embrace Todd, her head turning to a position from which she could read the teleprompter.

'Don't say that, Gil,' she said breathlessly. 'Not after what we've had.'

His reading was far smoother than hers:

'What we had was wrong,' he said. 'Because of Felix it was wrong. I was weak. But now with Courtney to give me strength . . .'

A loud door chime sounded, prompting Gil to break off and Sybil to move away from him. Meanwhile, there was a murmur of unintelligible words offstage – made to sound as if they emanated from a butler in the entry hall. The offstage words were followed by the entrance of Julian, as Doctor Goodman. Doffing his wet raincoat and hat, Julian glanced towards the teleprompter.

Todd greeted him with: 'Doctor Goodman . . .'

'Gil,' Julian said. 'Sybil, my dear.' Again, he turned to Todd, addressing his next remark to him. 'It's heartwarming to see Felix's friends rallying to support his loving wife.'

Bibi rushed to the good doctor's side. 'You dear soul, you shouldn't be out on a night like this.'

'Felix was very special to me,' said Julian. 'Where else to be but with his grieving widow?'

Hardly a grieving widow, she responded, 'Dear, dear, Doctor Goodman,' she said. 'You're so giving to all of us.'

Suddenly the French doors slammed open. The rain slashed in. With the driving rain came Nita, playing Courtney. Soaked by the rain machine's downpour, she closed the doors after her.

Todd and Bibi gaped in real, shocked surprise. How had she got out of jail? What was she doing in this scene? What did it mean that she was playing Courtney and not The Avenger?

The pair of stage lovers weren't the only ones surprised by Nita's unscheduled appearance. Julian was so caught off guard that he appeared to be knocked slightly backwards by a jolt of electricity. Knowing when they'd been upstaged, Todd and Bibi exchanged glances and withdrew into a corner of the study, surrendering the spotlight to Julian and Nita.

A true professional, Julian quickly adapted to the new development. His face glowed at the sight of Nita. Thrust deeply into the drama of the scene by his own delusions, Julian acted, rather *behaved*, towards Nita as though he were not a acting out a role but experiencing a real-life drama.

Portraying Courtney, Nita said, 'I hoped I'd find you here, Doctor.'

'Courtney, child!' Julian exclaimed, reading his lines from the prompter. 'The police let you go! I knew they would. My dear girl, thank God!'

'They didn't let me go,' she explained. 'I escaped in the laundry truck, when the guard looked away. Oh, Doctor Goodman, I didn't kill Felix! I didn't! I don't know where to turn. Help me. Please.'

Julian tried to calm her. 'Of course you didn't kill him,' he said. 'We all know that.'

On the brink of hysteria, Nita shouted: 'They're going to put me in prison for the rest of my life.'

'No, my dear. No, they won't,' Julian assured her, taking her in a paternal embrace. 'I won't let that happen. I give you my word. I won't let it happen . . .' Immersed in the scene, Julian continued to take his lines from the teleprompter. In the booth, Jessica anxiously awaited the outcome. Julian continued: 'Felix deserved to die . . . what he was doing to your career . . . to the careers of so many of my friends . . . She had to be stopped . . . who better to stop her than The Avenger? . . . Nobody knows who he is. Not even Joyce herself . . . it was a perfect cover for killing her . . . she was destroying my family . . . That's why I killed Joyce, Courtney. And why I took the bible she'd written. I *had to*– She'll bring no more pain to any of you . . .'

The witnesses to his performance reacted with confusion and disbelief. How much of his confession was real and how much was in the script? Had he strayed from the written dialogue? Was he, Julian, actually confessing to Joyce's murder? Or was he merely being prompted and convincingly parroting the lines? No one, save Jessica, Carol and Lieutenant Antonelli, knew for certain. Yet Julian had spoken all the doctor's lines so convincingly that he himself seemed to believe them all to be true. In the control room, where the onlookers asked themselves these troubling questions, there was silence – broken only when Gordon, cued subtly by Jessica, spoke into the microphone:

'Okay, folks. That's a cut. We'll wrap for the day.'

Quietly exchanging looks among themselves, Jessica and the others in the control booth opened the door and walked down the short set of stairs to the stage floor.

The set was deathly quiet. Expectantly, the entire cast and crew looked on with self-conscious awkwardness as Jessica moved to Julian. Only he seemed to be himself – or whomever he thought he was at the moment.

'You're sure it's okay, Gordon?' Julian asked the producer-director. 'I could do it better with a little . . .'

'No, no,' answered Gordon. 'It was fine.'

Jessica greeted him with a subdued, 'Hello, Julian . . .'

His face lit up at the sight of her. 'Well, hello Mrs Fletcher. How nice to see you.'

No one dared stir. Jessica felt everyone's eyes on her and Julian, although Julian appeared not to be perturbed by the intense interest in their conversation.

'Julian, I think there's something we'd all like to know. How did you get into Joyce Holleran's apartment?'

He looked at her, somewhat bewildered. She went on to explain herself:

'The street entrance. And the penthouse. Both doors are always kept locked.'

Julian smiled, pleased with himself. 'Oh, yes, yes. Well, I had keys, you see . . . I'd taken them from Joyce in the morning, slipped off and had some duplicates made . . . then returned them to her desk before she knew they were gone.'

Yes, Nita recalled being in Joyce's office when she found her lost keys. She broke in, saying, 'I remember her searching for them.'

'So do I,' said Carol. 'She asked me if I'd seen them.'

'Me too,' rejoined Nita. 'I was in her office when she found them . . . on her desk . . . like Julian said.'

Jessica took the floor again, this time withdrawing The Avenger's.45 automatic from inside her purse.

'And this is the gun you shot her with?' she asked Julian.

Because he regarded himself as The Avenger, Julian seemed slightly miffed that Jessica would even see a need to pose the question. 'Well, of course. That is The Avenger's, isn't it? Yes, that's it. That's the one I used.'

'But this isn't the gun that killed her,' Jessica told him.

He shook his head in disagreement. 'You're mistaken, dear lady.'

'You didn't kill Mrs Holleran, Julian,' said Jessica. 'This gun was filled with blanks. Joyce was shot with a.38 police

special. The kind Inspector Holcomb uses – a gun which is, incidentally, missing from the prop box.'

Her revelation had the ring of accusation to it, and all eyes turned to Herbert Upton.

'Wait a minute,' objected Herbert. 'I was in the Village rehearsing with . . .'

Jessica interrupted. 'I know where *you* were, Mr Upton. Your gun was taken to cloud the issue.'

A man let off the hook, Herbert Upton looked noticeably relieved. The others circled around Jessica, moving in closer, as she proceeded to recreate the night of the murder. Although she had eliminated Herbert Upton as a suspect, she fixed her gaze on him and began recounting the complicated sequence of events:

'While you were watching rehearsals of the play, Joyce Holleran's murderer was watching from some kind of cover as Julian, dressed as The Avenger, got off the penthouse elevator. The actual murderer watched as Julian unlocked the penthouse doors with Joyce's duplicate set of keys.'

Turning to face Julian, Jessica continued to spin her tale of murder:

'Then you, Julian, made your way quietly into Joyce's office. She saw you and was terrified. Just as you'd seen The Avenger do in her script, you raised the.45 automatic and cocked it. She tried to get away. But you fired the gun before she could escape. The blanks went off – only Joyce didn't know they were blanks. The shock caused her to stagger, and she fell onto her deak and to the floor.'

Amazed by her powers of deduction used to recreate the scene, Julian nodded, confirming her description of the scene. Jessica resumed the story:

'You thought you'd killed her. Perhaps she had fainted, or was knocked momentarily unconscious by the fall. You reached over and took the typewritten pages from her desk – which is what you came for – and then hurred out. Unbeknownst to you, the real murderer was waiting to finish what you had only begun. Unlocking the penthouse door with a key of his own, that person had entered the

apartment and followed your every move, seeing you shoot Mrs Holleran with *a blank cartridge*. When you had gone, Julian, the real murderer saw Mrs Holleran lying stunned on the floor, giving him the opportunity he needed . . .'

Then Jessica turned and faced Larry Holleran:

'Isn't that pretty much the way it happened, Mr Holleran?'

Jessica's rapt audience drew their breath in a collective gasp as the renowned mystery writer pointed the accusing finger; none was more taken aback than Larry Holleran himself.

'Hey, wait a minute,' he objected. '*I* didn't kill Joyce.'

'Oh, but you did,' Jessica said, most assuredly, and went on to explain just how she thought he'd done it: 'I don't know the exact series of events, but it's enough to say that when you saw your wife stunned, you got your gun – the one you kept in the house for protection against intruders. (I recall, our first meeting, you mentioning your having shot a burglar). While you were away getting the gun – the.38 police special – your wife revived enough to call Mr LaMonica . . . you returned, caught her as she mentioned Nita's name, pulled the telephone cord from the wall . . . then you fired the fatal shot.'

Jessica paused momentarily and glanced around her at the stares of disbelief. Catching her breath, she resumed:

'Then, Mr Holleran, you wrapped the cord around her body to make it look as if it pulled from the wall when she fell.'

His voice quivering, Larry made a desperate attempt to defend himself. 'Oh, come on. Why would I kill her? I had no motive. She was a gold mine to me – *alive*.'

'Perhaps at some time in the future. But you weren't prepared to wait that long. She knew about Bibi, and you knew it was only a matter of time before things blew up in your face. I think you decided to get what you could – *and* Bibi – while you had the chance.'

Larry Holleran laughed, expecting the cast and crew to join him. They regarded him stonily.

'Hey, will you listen to this?' he pleaded with them. 'You every heard such garbage like this before? I gotta tell you, lady: you've got some case of somethin' but what you don't have is *proof;* so take this cock-and-bull story of yours and sell it to Hollywood.'

Indignantly, he started to storm off, only to be stopped by Jessica's retort:

'There *is* proof, Mr Holleran. It will come when the police compare the slugs taken from your wife's body and from Gordon LaMonica's shoulder – and compare them with the one taken from the burglar you shot in your apartment last year. The burglar *you* shot with *your* gun. Would that be proof enough for you?'

Overcome by a flash of panic, he bolted for the stage exit he'd used to escape the night he shot Gordon LaMonica. But this time, there were two of Antonelli's policemen waiting in the wings to intercept him. Forcing his arms behind his back, they handcuffed Larry Holleran and hustled him out the door to their parked squad car.

As the entire cast and crew witnessed the arrest, Lieutenant Antonelli sidled over to Jessica and gave her an appreciative nod.

'So, how'd you know he used the same gun on that burglar a year ago?' Antonelli asked.

'Actually,' Jessica stated, ruefully, 'I didn't.'

She looked at the Lieutenant. Returning her look, he smiled and winked. She smiled back, feeling a great sense of personal satisfaction. There was much for her to be happy about: She had solved the murder. She had cleared Nita's name and saved her career. *And* she had won a fan in Lieutenant Antonelli who, she had little doubt, would become an avid mystery reader very soon indeed.

Mystery writer Jessica Fletcher can't seem to complete any of her murder mysteries these days, what with having to deal with real life murders on both sides of the Atlantic.

But it's all in the family – so to speak. First of all, her cousin Emma, a London music hall singer, mysteriously disappears after a series of attempts on her life, leaving Jessica to find the party which wants the singer dead. And then in New York, Jessica's niece, an actress in a TV soap opera, becomes the main suspect in the killing of the show's producer.

But Jessica surprises audience and actors alike by exposing the murderer, proving that whether in London or New York, all the world's a stage.

MURDER, SHE WROTE 4: MURDER IN TWO ACTS

A novel by David Deutsch
Based on the Universal television series MURDER, SHE WROTE
Created by Peter S. Fischer and Richard Levinson & William Link

Adapted from the episodes 'Sing A Song Of Murder' written by Peter S. Fischer, and 'Death In The Afternoon', teleplay by Paul Savage, story by Paul W. Cooper

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